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# // P R O L O G U E //

The battle was ending. ThunderClan and ShadowClan cats were limping back to their Clans, soaking wet and bloody. WindClan and RiverClan were regrouping in the middle, treating the wounded and reuniting. The wind lashed down angrily on the world. Rain pelted the ground. At the far end of WindClan, just beside the Thunderpath, were four cats. They were nestled under the roots of a tree. Water seeps into their hiding spot. A young queen, Mintspot, pressed her cold body closer to the back of the cold cave. Her light grey fur was sleek with sweat. Her body trembled slightly. Her stomach bulged out of her fur. A dark tabby cat with sharp yellow eyes put his tail calmly on her back. He was a warrior, Brownclaw, ordered to protect the weakest cats in the Clan while the battle had raged.

"ThunderClan and ShadowClan are retreating," he said comfortingly. Another old tabby tom looked at Mintspot worriedly. He was an elder named Antpelt. Another elder poked her head out of the den. She had dark ginger coloured fur patched with white but her eyes were alight. Her name was Russetstorm.

"Are you ok?" asked Russetstorm. Mintspot shivered in reply.

"Are- are the kits coming?" asked Brownclaw. Suddenly, Mintspot collapsed to the ground. Her body convulsed. Brownclaw's eyes widened.

"W-what do I do?" he asked, almost to himself. Russetstorm bent down beside Mintspot.

"You're going to be ok...," she whispered. "They're coming... Somebody, get her something to bite on. I remember Troutfur doing this for me." Mintspot's vision blurred and not because of the dark. Her stomach contracted. Pain seared through her body. She wanted to sleep. She wanted the pain to end. She needed her mate, Beetlejaw more than ever. There was too much pain to bear, she whipped her head back and let out an awful wail.

"Push!" cried Antpelt. Brownclaw passed Mintspot a branch. She snapped it into two. Brownclaw quickly gave her another branch. She sunk her teeth into it and bit hard. She gave a sigh as a

kit came out. The cats around her all breathed in relief. Mintspot turned to see the kit. It was beautiful. She felt more calm now. Love puled through her veins. She wanted to hold the kit tightly to her. The kit was a small bundle of fur. Russetfur began to lick the kit to keep it warm. Mintspot watched, unable to speak. Suddenly, pain coursed through her body once more. She wailed out. Minutes passed. Every cat urged Mintspot to push. She had to get through it. Then suddenly, there was a crack of thunder. The tree tilted on its roots. Dirt splashed into the cats' eyes. Mintspot felt the ground move under her.

"They tree's been struck by lightning!" exclaimed Antpelt. "We need to get out. Now." Brownclaw grabbed Mintspot's scruff while Antpelt helped heave her towards the entrance. Russetfur grabbed the kit.

"Get the kit out!" rasped Mintspot. Russetfur gave a small nod and slipped out of the tree. The most unbearable pain ran through Mintspot's body. She thrashed.

"Mintspot. We've got to go," Antpelt cried. The ground lurched under them. Mintspot went flying into the opposite wall. She went limp with pain. Brownclaw rushed to her and tried to grab her. Another bolt of pain seared through Mintspot's body. She lashed out. Brownclaw had to let go. The tree was tipping. Antpelt and Brownclaw pulled and heaved as Mintspot twisted and thrashed. Finally, Brownclaw commanded Antpelt to get out.

"I'll do it myself," he said surely. Antpelt reluctantly fled. "Mintspot, you've got to get up. We need to get out of here." There was a loud crack. The bark of the tree pushed onto Brownclaw's head. He flattened his ears. Mintspot wasn't listening. She could only feel the pain. The intense, unbearable pain. She wished more than anything it would go. She would do anything. Anything. Brownclaw sunk his teeth into Mintspot's scruff and dragged her. He had to crouched low. His muscles pained and he stumbled upon roots. He struggled to drag Mintspot over a large root poking out of the ground. He squeezed through tight spots. Mintspot was moaning and wailing, lashing out her legs and swinging her tail. Brownclaw found the entrance. With a large heave, he pulled Mintspot out of under the tree. He collapsed on the ground, panting hard. Rain pelted their pelts. Brownclawblinked and saw a small shape slide to the ground. A second kit. Quickly, he ran up to it and took it delicately between his fangs. Mintspot shuddered. It was over. Her

pain was over. The last kit was out. Thank StarClan. She didn't care about anything anymore. The pain was gone. She wanted to sleep. There was a loud creak. The tree tipped over dangerously. Brownclaw snapped back to his senses. Suddenly, Russetfur and Antpelt rushed towards them, covered in mud and soaking wet.

"Brownclaw move!" howled Antpelt. Brownclaw grabbed the kit and shouted at Mintspot.

"Mintspot, move move move!" he hollered. Mintspot couldn't move. Brownclaw tried pushing her, the newborn kit clutched in his jaw. Antpelt reached them. They both struggled to move Mintspot, their feet sinking into the mud. The tree tipped over and fell. Brownclaw leapt back and Antpelt dodged. Mintspot stayed on the ground, unmoving. A loud noise resounded as the tree hit the ground. Crack. Part of Mintspot's leg was underneath the tree. The pain as her leg twisted and cracked made Mintspot dizzy. But she was wide awake. Russetfur, Antpelt and Brownclaw rushed to her side. Brownclaw pushed the small kit to Russetfur.

"Take it," he said hurriedly. Russetfur put the two kits down and licked each one repeatedly, keeping an eye on Antpelt and Brownclaw. The tried to move Mintspot away but the tree was too heavy.

"Oh StarClan it hurts," wailed Mintspot. She writhed in pain. Brownclaw started digging with Antpelt's help. Mud splashed at their fur, making them tired and heavy. Finally, they cried out in glee as Mintspot managed to pull herself free. She limped then stumbled to the ground.

"Are you alright?" gasped Brownclaw. "You have two kits. Two healthy kits." Mintspot couldn't move her leg. She glanced at the kits Russetfur was licking. She saw her first born and felt love flowing through her.

"G-give me the kit," she whispered but Brownclaw heard her. Brownclaw took the firstborn kit and passed it to her. She licked it lovingly. It meowed softly.

"We need to get back," Brownclaw says finally. "You need to get checked by Troutfur and the kits need someplace warm."

"Kits?" murmured Mintfur. She had forgotten about the other kit.

"Yes, your second kit. Look," Russetfur said gently, nodding to the small bundle at her feet. Mintfur glanced at it. The kit that had caused her the most pain.

"Oh yeah," she said, a smile flickering on her face. "Kits." Suddenly, a roar resounded. The cats turned to the Thunderpath. Bright lights flashed in their eyes. They had not noticed the Monster. Antpelt's eyes went wide.

"We really need to go," he agreed. Brownclaw helped Mintspot up. Russetfur took the second born kit while Mintspot took her first born. Brownclaw supported Mintspot on one side and Antpelt on the other. Mintspot's leg dragged behind her as they limped away. Suddenly, a pain seared through her body. Mintspot's mouth opened and she felt her body shake. Her first born kit fell to the ground. She let out a wail of horror. Before any of the cats could do anything, a Two-leg appeared in the rain. The Two-leg towered over them. Then bent down. Brownclaw dragged Mintspot away while Antpelt struggled away. Mintspot let out a small cry of horror as they fled to hide in a bush. Her kit. Her beloved kit.

"let me go!" she wailed. Browcnclaw held her down.

"You can't. He probably won't see your kit. We'll go back and get it right when the Two-leg leaves," Brownclaw said, watching the scene intently. The Two-leg put his hand in his pocket and brought something to his ear.

"There's a tree blocking the road!" he shouted over the rain angrily. "Of course I'm going to be late! What do you think? I can't drive over a bloody tree!" He slid the thing back into his pocket. Then he stepped forward to inspect the tree. Mintspot choked through her sobs as the man's boot almost hit her kit. Then the Two-leg turned around and his boot hit the kit.

"Nooo!" yelled Mintspot. The Two-leg didn't hear. He bent down and stared at the kit through the rain. He picked it up in his large hands and turned it around.

"No no no no no! Not my kit!" Mintspot yelled. Her body shook. Brownclaw watched in horror. Antpelt was frozen to the spot, not knowing what to do. What to say. Russetfur let out a small cry of sadness. Then the Two-leg tucked the kit into his sleeve and entered the monster once more. There was a clank of metal. Then a loud angry roar and the Monster growled, swivelled around and sped off.

# Chapter 1

Willowkit grinned and wiggled her tail. She leapt up and tumbled into the brown kit named Acornkit. Acornkit struggled to get out of her grip and finally managed. They both faced each other, small smiles on their faces.

"I'm the leader of ThunderClan and you will never beat me!" roared Acornkit.

"Well I'm the leader of RiverClan and you will never beat *me*!" retorted Willowkit. They crouched and Willowkit got ready to pounce. Suddenly, she felt her feet lift of her ground and teeth in her scruff. She wriggled and looked down as the ground lift off.

"Your mum's calling you," came a gruff voice from above. Acornkit frowned.

"Hey! You're not playing with me anymore?" he said disappointedly. Willowkit made a face.

"Sorry," she murmured. Her father, Beetlejaw dropped her off at the entrance of the nursery. He licked her. A sign of affection. She smiled a little.

"What did you do now?" he said under his breath then padded away. Willowkit trotted into the nursery. Her mother was there. Mintspot. Mintspot had tired eyes and lay spread on the soft grass in the nursery. Besides her mother and Willowkit, the nursery was empty. Willowkit padded towards her mother.

"Mintspot?" she asked in her small sweet voice. Mintspot's eyes snapped to her.

"Willowkit, what were you doing?" she asked.

"I-I was playing with Acornkit," Willowkit replied innocently. She didn't know what she had done wrong. She didn't like upsetting her mother.

"What did I tell you about that?" asked Mintspot, her eyes cold.

"You said he was a bad influence," mumbled Willowkit.

"Yes," nodded Mintspot then she sat up. "So why did you play with him?"

"I was bored," cried Willowkit. "I'm sorry."

"Don't do it again," Mintspot said sharply. Willowkit

nodded. Mintspot closed her eyes. Willowkit knew why she was sad. Willowkit's brother had disappeared. She didn't know how or why. She didn't know any of the details except that her brother, Stormkit had disappeared and it had sort of destroyed something in Mintspot. Mintspot shook herself.

"Stay in here. I don't want you to get in trouble going out. Or get hurt," Mintspot said, then she limped towards the nursery entrance. Her left hind leg dragged behind her. It was a sort of unnecessary limb, floppy and ugly. Willowkit couldn't help but stare.

"What are you staring at?" snapped Mintspot. She hated it when cats stared at her legs. She hated the pity that filled their eyes. She knew that Willowkit meant nothing bad with it but she couldn't help it. She gave a small sigh and limped out of the nursery. Willowkit watched her go. She didn't know how Mintspot's leg got hurt. Nobody had ever told her. Only once, Russetfur had wanted to tell Willowkit but Mintspot had interrupted them and changed the subject. Willowkit had not talked to Russetfur since. Willowkit sat down on the grass and pondered. She wondered about her brother. She wondered what he looked like. She wondered what he was doing. She wished he would come home so they could just be a proper family. Not the weird family in the Clan. the family with a missing kit. She also wished Stormkit was there because she'd be able to play with him. She knew Stormkit would be the only kit Mintspot would be alright with letting her play with. There was some shuffling. Willowkit pricked her ears. Then a small face appeared in the nursery. Acornkit smiled.

"Hey," he said. Willowkit glanced around as if Mintspot was lurking in the shadows.

"What are you doing here?" whispered Willowkit, tilting her head.

"It's the nursery. I'm allowed to be here," pointed out Acornkit. "But anyways, Snailkit and I are here to save you." Another head poked into the nursery. It was Snailkit, Acornkit's sibling. Snailkit had brown fur with dark brown stripes which swirled slightly at his stomach. The markings had reminded his mother, Wrencry, of a snail's.

"But you're not supposed to be here," pointed out Willowkit.

"Why not? We sleep her as well," Snailkit shrugged.

"but Mintspot doesn't want me to talk to you," Willowkit said dejectedly.

"Why not? What's with her?" snorted Acornkit. "Who cares? Let's go!" Suddenly, a cat padded into the nursery. Acornkit and Snailkit looked up. Busted, thought Willowkit. But it was only Acornkit and Snailkit's father, Pigeonflight.

"Come on kits!" Pigeonflight said with a smile. "I'll show you both some moves!" Snailkit's eyes lit up and he trotted out of the nursery. Acornkit gave Willowkit an apologising look then bounded after his father. Willowkit sighed. She huddled into a ball. She wished Beetlejaw would do the same with her. She wished he would spend more time with her. He seemed distant. Sometimes, Willowkit thought he was going to ask her to play with him but then he'd turn away as if something had dawned on him. Willowkit would sometimes get an affectionate lick or bite from Beetlejaw but when she turned around to look at him, to see if it really was him, he would turn away and quickly walk off. She didn't understand. Willowkit took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her mind was reeling. She forced her breathing to slow. Then she forced herself to go to sleep. She had done it many times. She could force herself to sleep anywhere. She had to do it. It kept the thoughts from racing through her mind whenever she was alone. Which was a lot.

# Chapter 2

Willowkit pricked her ears and craned her neck over Mintspot's large paw. Mintspot rested her head on her paws, not listening, eyes closed. On the otherside of the nursery, giving Mintspot and Willowkit space as Mintspot had requested, were Wrency and her kits. Wrencry was telling a bedtime story to Acornkit and Snailkit. Snailkit was curled up in her belly, eyes closed. Acornkit was sitting beside her, looking up at her, eyes sparkling. He was listening intently. Willowkit too, was listening. She loved Wrencry's stories although Mintspot hated them. Wrencry sometimes spotted Willowkit listening and would raise her voice. Tonight, the story was about the battle between ThunderClan and ShadowClan and WindClan and RiverClan. Willowkit knew that she had been born the night the battle had ended. She didn't know why the battle had started in the first place. She didn't know who had been involved, why her Clan had joined forces with RiverClan or even who had died.

"The battle started over a piece of land. ThunderClan started going into our territory, then they started going into RiverClan's territory. ShadowClan had been threatening RiverClan as well. And remember when I told you about the alliance WindClan and ShadowClan had a long time ago?" Wrencry said. Acornkit shook his head and Willowkit did the same, then realised Wrencry wasn't talking to her.

"Well, there was a big big big battle and ShadowClan fought alongside us... Well not really actually. ShadowClan sort of forced us to join sides with them. We were sort of in the middle and we had to join a side. ThunderClan and RiverClan had joined forces afterall. Well, after that, ShadowClan thought that we owed them something. I mean, as if! We fought *for* them. Why would we owe them anything? Small fights would break out at the borders. Cats would cross very often. Then ShadowClan somehow got ThunderClan on their side. Finally, we managed to get RiverClan on our side. ShadowClan had been threathening them as well.This time, we won the battle," explained Wrencry. Willowkit struggled to understand.

"Can you tell me about Heartstar?" asked Acornkit. He glanced at Willowkit and flashed a grin. Willowkit beamed back. She had told Acornkit that out of all the stories, the one about Heartstar had been her favourite. It made her feel... warm. Acornkit had insisted his mother on telling it to him many more times after that, just so she could hear it again.

"Again?" said Wrencry. "Well. I now you love it." Acornkit nodded. If only Wrencry knew.

"Yeah. Please tell it again," Acornkit said.

"Alright," relented Wrencry. "A long time ago, a kit was born into ShadowClan." The story of Heartstar had grown to be a sort of legend told in all the Clans. Each Clan had been involved in some way after all. Of course, it was told differently in each Clan, favouring the Clan it was being told by.

"His name was Heartkit. Brightheart, his mother, died giving birth to the kit. Some time after, he fell in love with an apprentice from our Clan, WindClan. They kept their love a secret from their own Clans. One day, ShadowClan found out. Heartkit- Heartpaw now, was given a punishment. But he blew it. He brought back rogues to ShadowClan. This time, he was kicked out of ShadowClan. He came to WindClan, asking us for shelter. We gave him shelter, only for a few days. He had fallen in love with one of our apprentices, so we didn't want him to stay too long. So when he left he joined RiverClan. ShadowClan were very angry. They threatened RiverClan. Then one day, they decided to take revenge. They trained hard to be able to get their revenge on Heartpaw- now Heartstorm. Heartstorm was a good and loyal warrior to RiverClan and ShadowClan hated it. Stormpelt, Heartstorm's father had also had kit with a warrior in ShadowClan who wasn't Brightheart. ShadowClan decided that they would use that against Heartstorm. When RiverClan forced us to join forces with them and when we fought against RiverClan and ThunderClan, Heartstorm was forced to watch his own son die at the paw of his half brother. He went on to become Heartstar, leader of RiverClan," finished Wrencry finally. Willowkit had a small smile on her face. Wrencry glanced up and Willowkit quickly ducked behind Mintspot. "What is the moral of this story?" Willowkit listened. Acornkit couldn't come up with an answer.

"ShadowClan are mouse dungs?" Acornkit suggested finally. Willowkit listened intently.

"Hhhmm," chuckled Wrencry. "That is true. There are many morals to this story. Don't break the warrior code. Be loyal to your Clan... Goodnight. Now it's time for you to sleep." Acornkit yawned and gave a small nod. He curled up in a ball. Wrencry wrapped her tail around both her kits, keeping them warm. She gazed at them lovingly. Willowkit sunk to the ground and curled up in her own little ball. Her mind raced but this time, she couldn't go to sleep.

# Chapter 3

"Roooooook!" came a hight pitched voice. Rook glanced up and stared out of the window. Running down the garden was his owner, Saffanah. Saffanah had dark brown hair, tied into two braids, brown eyes and a happy smile. Her mother, Mary, opened the door for her.

"Hey, take off your shoes first, remember?" Marry reminded her daughter. Rook leapt off the windowsill. He padded past Saffanah's bed and trotted into the long hallway. He reached the top of the stairs and Saffanah appeared. She smiled at him and opened her arms. He purred as she enveloped him in a hug.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Didn't do much...," shrugged Rook. "I was waiting for you." As always, Saffanah doesn't understand that Rook is answering. Instead, she picked him up and brought him into her room. She put him back on the ground. He trotted to her bed and leapt up. The blanket was light blue and soft. Saffanah sat down next to Rook and ran her fingers through his fur. He purred to let her know he enjoyed it. He loved seeing her face lit up with happiness. He snuggled closer to her. The doorbell rung. Saffanah got up and peered out of the window.

"It's Dad!" exclaimed Saffanah. She rushed out of the room and Rook heard her footsteps as she ran downstairs. Rook jumped off the bed and rushed after her. He reached the bright living room and at the door stood the father, Jeremy, Saffanah in his arms. Jeremy set Saffanah down and pecked Mary on the cheek.

"You're home early," smiled Mary.

"Yep," nodded Jeremy happily. "How about we all go to Burger King for dinner tonight? A treat from me." Saffanah squealed happily. Rook watched from the corner, waiting to be spotted. Jeremy finally glanced up and saw him. He smiled and bent down.

"Hey Rook," he said then looked at Saffanah. "How have you been taking care of him?" Rook trotted over to Jeremy. Jeremy ran his rough fingers over Rook's head. Rook liked it and purred happily. He had missed Jeremy. He loved his family although he

didn't see Jeremy very often. Sometimes, Jeremy would go away for a few days. Other times, he would come home so late that Saffanah and Mary would be asleep. Only Rook would be awake and Rook would stay with him watching late TV or eating dinner in the sleeping house.

"I was just about to start cooking, but Burger King sounds fun," smiled Mary.

"Yay!" exclaimed Saffanah. "Can Rook come?"

"I don't think they'll let a cat inside," Jeremy said. "But I'm sure Rook has other things to do? Right Rook?" Rook knew that he had to agree.

"Yeah!" he nodded.

"See?" smiled Jeremy. Then he scratched Rook behind the ear. Jeremy, Saffanah and Mary went to the living room to eat tea and talk. Rook yawned and slipped out of the house from the cat flap. The sky was clear and the weather warm. Rook trotted down the garden then leapt onto the white fence. He balanced perfectly. He walked along the fence until he reached the tree in the neighbour's garden. He pushed himself off the fence and landed on one of the branches of the tree. He stared at the neighbour's house. The neighbour was called Arthur McFlint. He was a heavy built man with an unkept beard and dull eyes. He had been the one to dump Rook at Saffanah's house. Rook was glad he had. He would never have met his family if not for Arthur. Arthur and his wife's house was large and grey. The garden was a mess. Weeds grey everywhere. Rubbish lay hidden and in sight. There was even a broken car to one side of the house. Rook would sometimes spend hours just watching Arthur inside the house, smoking a cigar. He would wonder where Arthur had found him. He wondered about his mother. About his father. Maybe he had siblings. Of course, he knew he would never know about his cat family. It didn't matter because he already had a family. A great family.

"Daydreaming again?" came a gruff voice. Rook glanced down. On the street was a grey cat with messy fur. His name was Don. Don scrambled onto the branch next to Rook.

"No... just thinking," Rook said.

"Thinking about what?" Don asked.

"Where I came from," shrugged Rook. Rook had known Don since he had lived with Saffanah's family, so his whole life. He would never say it out loud but he always thought it was a miracle

how Don was still alive and able to climb trees.

"Why do you think about that?" asked Don, raising his eyes. "You've got a great family." Don lived with a lone man in an old house a few streets down. The man was in his late thirties, changing jobs every few days and didn't really care about Don. Don of course, didn't care about the man either. Don had never told Rook the man's name and Rook had never asked.

"You're young," continued Don. "Only what, three months old?"

"Yeah," nodded Rook.

"You've got to think about the future. Or the present," Don said. "Unlike me, I'm allowed to think of the past. There isn't much future left for me." Don burst out into a gruff laughter. Rook didn't find it very funny. He thought it was slightly sad. He didn't want Don to leave. Don was one of his best friends, not that he had many friends. Don always made jokes about dying.

"Don't say that," Rook replied as he always did.

"It's the truth, kid," shrugged Don. "Anyways, I'm going now." With that, Don leapt off the tree, stumbled slightly then padded off. Rook watched him go then turned his attention back to his house. He glanced once more at the McFlint's house then leapt off the fence and slipped back into his own home.

# Chapter 4

Willowkit bit into the mouse and tore off a chunk of meat. She chewed slowly, relishing the succulent taste. Acornkit approached her. She was sitting underneath the shade of a bush, watching the going ons of the Clan. Every member of the Clan had been nice to her when she was younger but Mintspot had scolded her when she had happily chatted to warriors, asking about what it was like, to be a warrior. Willowkit had slowly just redrawn herself from the rest of the Clan and cats just gave her pitying or sad looks. Willowkit was used to being looked over.

"Is mouse your favourite food?" asked Acornkit.

"Yeah," shrugged Willowkit. She had only ever tried mouse. "I've never tried anything else."

"Why not?" asked Acornkit.

"I don't know," shrugged Willowkit. A few days before Willowkit would be old enough to eat real prey, Mintspot had given her a mouse. Willowkit had not liked it but Mintspot had refused to give her milk. "You need to learn to eat real food", her mother had said. Willowkit knew her mother was only doing it for her own good. After that, she just ate mice and she liked it.

"Well, how about you give the rest of your mouse to your dad?" suggested Acornkit. "I'll go get us something great to eat." Willowkit shrugged. She didn't want to do that. Beetlejaw was chatting with Lizardpelt.

"go on," urged Acornkit. "are you scared of your own dad?" Willowkit's eyes widened. Of course not! How dare he suggest such a thing? With determination, she took the rest of the mouse in her mouth and trotted over to her father. To her delight, when he looked up from the conversation and saw her, his eyes lit up. She beamed brightly. This was what a real father did. That was how Pigeonflight looked at his kits. Beetlejaw stopped talking to Lizardpelt and padded over to his kit.

"Hey," he said.

"Hi Beetlejaw," said Willowkit. "Do you want my mouse?" Beetlejaw looked at the half eaten mouse.

"Sure," he said. "Do you not like it?"

"I'm going to try something new with Acornkit!" exclaimed Willowflight. She waited in anticipation for his answer. To her delight, he chuckled.

"That's good," smiled Beetlejaw. "I suggest trying lizard. They're very crispy but soft inside. Maybe next time, I'll hunt one for you." Willowkit's eyes lit up. She could not have asked for more. She wanted to jump for joy. She wanted to leap at Beetlejaw but she didn't want to ruin this moment either. She felt as if it was balancing precariously.

"Yay!" she exclaimed happily. "Thank you!" He took it delicately from his daughter. Then his face changed. Something seemed to have dawned on him. His eyes flickered to the nursery where Mintspot was probably laying. "I have to go." Then he swivelled around, the light fading from his eyes. He joined Lizardpelt once more and they walked off. Willowkit watched them go, wondering what she had done wrong. Then she headed for the fresh kill pile where Acornkit was. He searched through it. Finally, he found squirrel and brought it back to the bush for Willowkit.

"It's a squirrel," said Acornkit. "It's my favourite."

"I know what a squirrel is," replied Willowkit, slightly hurt but then added, "thanks." She took a small bite. It was much more different than a mouse. For one, it had so much more taste. She couldn't believe that something could be so succulent. More more succulent than the mouse. Her eyes lit up. She took another bite. It was soft and delicious.

"I love it," she mumbled through a mouthful. Acornkit smiled victoriously and they nibbled the squirrel together. Willowkit knew she wasn't supposed to be hanging out with Acornkit but she couldn't help it. Acornkit and Snailkit were the only kits in the Clan. And she was glad she had not brushed Acornkit away for her mother's sake. If not, she would never have tasted squirrel.

# Chapter 5

Rook watched from Saffanah's room window as the family's car drove out of the garage and sped off. He listened a few minutes more until the sound of their car was well and truly gone. Then he leapt off the window sill and padded downstairs. He entered the kitchen. His stomach grumbled. Beside the door were Rook's bowls. One always had clear cold water. Rook lapped up some of it. In the other bowl, the food was put. Sure enough, inside was a mound of mushy brown stuff. Some oil lingered around it. Rook didn't especially love the food. He had the same food everyday since he was born. But he didn't mind it. He gobbled down the squishy food and wandered around the empty house. He went into the master bedroom and into the closet. He curled up on a pile of clothes and closed his eyes. He loved the smell inside the closet. He rested for a moment before feeling bored. Then he trotted towards the front entrance and pushed out of the cat flap. The air was cool. Night was coming soon. Rook leapt over the fence and onto the street. Opposite the street was a large field of sunflowers. Beyond the sunflowers, a farm and many more fields, was the forest. When Rook climbed onto the roof of his house, he would squint and see the dark outline. Sometimes, he wouldn't be able to see it and he only had to trust that it was there. Rook walked down the street. No cars drove by. It was usually calm at night. Turning down the street, Rook spotted his other best friend's house. Domino, a black and white cat lived there with a couple, who had a baby and a dog named Diesel. The dog was small but its bark was loud. Rook trotted towards Domino's house. He knew the barking would come soon. Sure enough, when Diesel smelt Rook, he started going mad. He barked and barked, running by the fence in a crazy frenzy. Rook smiled slightly. Dog's were so stupid. Easily, Rook leapt onto the fence then from there, onto the pipe running alongside the house's roof. Diesel spotted him and started to jump. Rook watched, taunting him. Jump higher, he urged. Rook found the window of the attic with the small cat flap. He slipped inside. The attic was large with a sloping roof. To one side was a battered red sofa. To the other were boxes and old chairs. Rook knew that when Domino

wanted to escape the baby, he would come up here. Rook listened and pricked his ears. Finally, Diesel's barking stopped. Then there was a noise and from the cat flap appeared Domino. He grinned at Rook.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "Heard Diesel barking and I knew it was you."

"Stupid dog," grinned back Rook.

"I'm glad you're here. I was getting annoyed with the baby. It keeps crying," sighed Domino. "And the mum's gone so David's gotta take care of it and he can't even carry it right." Rook chuckled. "Anyways, you wouldn't understand. You've got the perfect family." Rook gave a small nod. He couldn't deny it.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go to the farm with me, tomorrow?" asked Rook. He had never been to the farm. He had only ventured to the middle of the sunflower field. Don had told him not to go to the farm. That it was a bad place. Rook had listened to him for most of his life as Don was sort of his father figure but now..., a deep feeling coursed through Rook. Maybe it was curiosity. He didn't know. But he wanted to get to that farm and he wanted to climb to the roof. Then he would be able to see the forest more closely. Something intrigued him about the forest.

"Why?" asked Domino, looking confused. "You know that place is a bad place."

"We don't know that. Only Don says it," Rook pointed out.

"And all the other cats from near here," added Domino. "Plus, there are other things to do. Like annoy Diesel. We could explore more of the town as well. Or we could go around and beg for food. My owners have started me on this weird diet with the most disgusting lame food ever!"

"Nah, we always do that," Rook said. "Come on, let's do something new."

"But why? it's dangerous," Domino said unsurely.

"We've never been there. We don't know," Rook pointed out.

"We could just not risk our lives," suggested Domino.

"Please?" Rook asked. "Or I'm going alone." Domino's eyes widened.

"You can't go alone, you're going to die," he exclaimed.

"So come with me," Rook said.

"To die *with* you?" Domino asked incredulously.

"Nobody said anything about dying."

"I did."

"I'm going alone then." There was a pause. A moment of silence as both cats stared each other down. Domino was a fun cat who was not especially bright but he was a good friend. He didn't want to let Rook go to his death alone.

"Fine. I'll go," huffed Domino finally. "But only if you let me eat some of your food. I'm literally starving on this diet."

# Chapter 6

Willowkit sat in the nursery, watching her mother. Mintspot was looking into the distance, her eyes bleary. Her useless leg was stretched out limply in front of her. Willowkit debated askin her mother to go outside. Finally, the enclosed and boring place was too much to take. Willowkit trotted over to Mintspot.

"Mintspot.., can I go outside?" asked Willowkit in a small voice. Mintspot turned to her as if just realising she was there.

"Huh?" said Mintspot.

"Can I go outside to play?" asked Willowkit slightly louder. She knew she had said something wrong. Mintspot's gaze turned cold and angry.

"To play?" she growled. Willowkit never understood what Mintspot had against playing or fun. Everytime it seemed like Willowkit was having fun or was happy, Mintspot would end it. Willowkit finally got used to it, thinking it was just her mother's personality.

"Yeah," mumbled Willowkit.

"You want to go outside and laugh and play?" Mintspot questioned. Willowkit nodded. That was what she wanted to do. Finally, Mintspot understood. "How dare you? Your brother is gone and all you want to do is play?!" Willowkit backed away. Mintspot had never yelled at her.

"I-I'm sorry," mumbled Willowkit. She felt bad. She hadn't meant to upset Mintspot. She hadn't meant to upset her brother either. She wished he would come back. They'd be a proper family. A cat burst into the nursery. It was Beetlejaw. He rushed up to Mintspot and licked her comfortingly on the nose. He glanced at Willowkit, slight concern in his eyes then turned his attention back to Mintspot.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

"Willow- stupid stupid kit," Mintspot spluttered. Beetlejaw gave Willowkit a hard stare.

"What did you do?" He demanded sternly. Willowkit hunched into a ball.

"I just- I just asked if I could play," replied Willowkit in a

small voice.

"You should have known better than to ask that," Beetlejaw warned. "Mintspot, it's alright. She didn't mean anything by it."

"You don't understand," Mintspot said, breathing heavily. "Everyday, I have to deal with her. She keeps wanting to go outside and play, I can see it. She doesn't even care. She doesn't care about Stormkit." Willowkit's eyes widened. Of course she cared about Stormkit! She was sure that he would be the only one who would be able to make things right. The only one who would understand him.

"Don't say that. It's not true," Beetlejaw soothed gently.

"Of course it's true. She's like the other kits," spat Mintspot. Willowkit bowed her head. Mintspot was talking as if she wasn't there.

"Willowkit, go outside for a while. I want to talk to Mintspot alone," Beetlejaw said. "Go have fun." Willowkit shuffled outside then ran through the clearing. She bundled into a few bushes and sprawled on the ground. She pushed her tears away. There was nothing to be sad about. She had always known that Mintspot was different. Not just because of her leg. She didn't gaze at Willowkit lovingly. She didn't talk to her. Not like Wrencry did to Snailkit and Acornkit.

"Hey Willowkit," came a gentle voice. Willowkit turned around. She was at the elder's den. Russetstorm lay under the shade of a bush. "How are you?"

"Good," mumbled Willowkit. Of course she wasn't good.

"Hmmm," Russetstorm said slowly. "Do you miss your brother?" Willowkit nodded.

"A lot," she said. And she did. Even though she never remembered him. She missed him. She ached for him to come back.

"Well, do you want me to tell you a bit about your brother?" asked Russetstorm. "Or has your mother already told you?" Mintspot had never directly told her any information about her brother.

"No, please tell me," Willowkit said, sitting up.

"Well, when your brother was born, underneath this tree, he was big and strong. When I licked him, I could feel him wriggling. It was as if he was already trying to walk. He had really

soft fur and a loud meow. When I brought him outside and hid him in the cover of a bush, I continued licking him. Do you know what he did then? He cried for milk. It was so cute. I could have sworn he said milk. Anyway, after that, you- you know the rest," sighed Russetstorm. Willowkit nodded. Stormkit sounded like a strong and brave kit. He would be a great warrior. No wonder his parents missed him so much. No wonder Mintspot was so distracted by him leaving. Willowkit tried to picture herself. Small, frail and shy. Only socialising with Acornkit, not the warriors, not the apprentices, not even the elders. Maybe that's why Mintspot never really paid attention to her. Because she wasn't as good as her brother. She hung her head. Or maybe Mintspot was just like that. Willowkit sighed. She looked up at the sky and imagined her brother. Maybe he was in a better place.

# Chapter 7

Rook slipped into the cat flap. Night had come and his family had just come home from dinner. Jeremy was in the living room with Mary. They had their arms around each other and they were watching something on the television. Rook slipped quietly past them and up the stairs. He pricked his ears. He could hear nothing except for the blaring of the television. He pushed into Saffanah's room through her slightly opened door. Saffanah was on her bed, blanket over her and staring at the ground. She blinked when she saw Rook and smiled.

"Hey Rook," she whispered. She knew he would come. He always did. Rook smiled back. He trotted towards her, licked her hand affectionately, making her giggle and leapt onto the bed. Saffanah turned around and stared at the ceiling. Rook made himself comfortable on the blanket. He curled up into a ball, giving one last look at Saffanah. She was closing her eyes now. Rook was there. She was ready to sleep.

"Good night Saf," whispered Rook. Saffanah's eyes flickered open as if she had heard something. She drifted off with a smile on her face.

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Rook slipped out of the cat flap early in the morning. Crickets chirped and the sun was just rising. Rook trotted from fence to fence. He finally saw Domino's house and leapt onto a roof. From there, he crossed all the roofs until he reached Domino's. He padded quietly on the pipe, peering over to see Diesel. Diesel was not there. He was probably still sleeping inside. Rook slipped inside the attic. Domino was there, sleeping curled up on the sofa. He looked peaceful. Rook watched him for a moment, giving him a few more seconds of rest. Then he trotted up to him and leapt onto the sofa.

"Wakey wakey," he said into Domino's ear. Domino jumped in surprise. His eyes opened lazily.

"What?" he moaned sleepily. Rook prodded him.

"Wake up. We're going to the farm," Rook said.

"Farm?" repeated Domino warily. He finally sat up, eyes still half closed. "I thought you would change your mind."

"Do you want some of my food or not?" asked Rook seriously.

"Fine. But let's eat first. Then we go," said Domino. "Follow me." Domingo shook himself then stretched before giving a large yawn. Then he led Rook to the attic door. They slipped out through the cat flap and slowly made their way down the stairs. Rook sniffed the air and listened carefully. At any sign of Diesel, he would have to run or hide. He didn't like the idea, he was no coward, but Diesel would bark and wake the whole house. They walked along a silent corridor. One door was open and Rook peered in. The room was bright and colourful. In a cot, a small baby was sleeping.

"Come on," Domino flicked his tail. They quietly padded down some more stairs and Rook found himself facing the front door. Prams and shoes were lined up beside it messily. They crossed the living room and into the kitchen.

"Where's Diesel?" asked Rook, not hearing the dog.

"Oh he's in the backyard. In his cage thing. He peed on the floor yesterday so it's his punishment," Domino said slightly smugly. He leapt onto the counter and Rook followed. Underneath a cupboard, were two bowls. One with cat food, the other with water. Rook sniffed the cat food. It smelt strongly of something. He didn't know what. He wrinkled his nose. The foot was brown and mushy. It looked even worst than Rook's food.

"Ew," Rook commented. Domino nodded then gobbled down the food.

"Can we go down to yours now and eat?" Domino said. Rook shrugged and rolled his eyes.

"Fine but then we get going," he said firmly. Domino nodded.

"Yeah of course," he said.

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Rook steered through the tall stems of sunflowers. It was dark as the sunflowers blocked any light from reaching them. Domino was nervously glancing about.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Domino muttered.

"I never said it was a good idea," replied Rook.

"aww thanks dude," Domino said. The ground was soft and moist under their feet. Small insects buzzed everywhere. Rook kept walking confidently. Domino followed behind, cowering at small noises. There was some squeaking.

"What's that?" whispered Domino. Rook rolled his eyes.

"You can't not know what that is," he said. "You're a cat."

"A mouse," guessed Domino. Rook nodded.

"You think we could hunt it?" asked Rook.

"Do you know how to hunt?" questioned Domino. There was some scuffling and the noises of mice were gone.

"No," admitted Rook. "We can try later."

"I'd rather eat the disgusting food my owners put out for me," shuddered Domino. Finally, they reached the end of the field and burst into daylight. Rook blinked in the sudden brightness. Then he stared out at what was in front of them. A small stream trickled in front of them and across from that was a field of long grasses and flowers. Behind that field was the farm. There was a big farmhouse and a new car parked in front of it. Behind that were some stables, a barn, pens for animals and a few paddocks. To the left of the farm were the large fields of crops the farmers grew. Domino trotted to the side of the stream and lapped the cold water thankfully.

"Mmmmm, this is soo good," mumbled Domino. Rook crouched beside the stream and drank some water as well. It was cold but clean. Rook pricked his ears. He stared at the field of long grasses and flowers.

"Do you hear that?" Rook whispered quietly.

"Mouse," nodded Domino, his tail rigid.

"I'm going to try and hunt it," Rook said. Domino gave him a skeptical look. Rook leapt over the stream and landed lightly. He crouched down and slowly made his way through the grasses. They tickled his stomach and nose but he he kept low and kept moving forward. He heard the faint scuffling of a mouse. He pricked his ears and kept his tail low. Every step was slow and quiet. He made sure to see what he was stepping on. He didn't know where these instincts came from but he loved it. He loved the feeling of exhilaration. The thought of being able to hunt. Suddenly, there was a squeak. It seemed right in front of him. The breeze blew

gently and as the grass swayed, Rook spotted the mouse. Rook suddenly tensed up and froze. He didn't know what to do now. He had managed to sneak up on it. But what was he going to do now? Jump? He'd make noise. He'd miss. Should he go closer? He didn't want to risk it. He hesitated too long. There was a loud ear piercing shriek. Rook jumped back in surprise and glanced up as something dark shot down. A second later a large eagle rose again. In its talons was a small wriggling mouse. The eagle shrieked in victory. Rook sighed and sat down. Domino trotted over to him.

"You managed to sneak up on it. That was good," Domino pointed out. "Stupid eagle."

"I just froze," sighed Rook.

"Well you've never hunted so that was really good," pointed out Domino. Rook was feeling sour. He wished he had just jumped. The eagle was probably laughing at him for not taking the mouse.

"I'll get it next time," Rook decided.

# Chapter 8

Willowkit peered through the bushes. She watched the apprentices playing around in the middle of the Clan. Dovepaw was a white and light grey she-cat. She had light coloured eyes and a delicate long tail. Her legs rippled with muscle. Willowkit had seen her run through camp. She had been so graceful and fast. As swift as the wind. Willowkit wondered maybe if she could be just as fast as Dovepaw, Mintspot might like her more. Whitepaw, Dovepaw's brother was sleek with snow white fur. He had a great sense of humour and loved to tease his sister. Willowkit imagined having siblings to play with. Everybody in the Clan seemed to have siblings.

"Hey," came a voice. Willowkit didn't turn around. She just pricked her ears. She assumed the cat was talking to somebody else. Why would they want to talk to her? "Willowkit." Willowkit spun around.

"Whatcha doing?" asked the cat. It was Lilypetal. She had soft lilac fur and gentle eyes.

"Watching," shrugged Willowkit. She hadn't talked to Lilypetal since she had been a tiny kit.

"Why don't you go out and join them?" asked Lilypetal. Willowkit almost giggled at the absurdity of the suggestion. "I mean it. Go out and play! You're a kit." Willowkit shuffled nervously on her paws.

"Stormkit is missing," blurted out Willowkit. She had now understood that Mintspot and Beetlejaw could not be happy when Stormkit was missing.

"I know," sighed Lilypetal, sitting beside Willowkit and gazing at her with tenderness. "And it must be hard for you."

"I wish he was here," nodded Willowkit. She truly believed he would solve all their problems. Of course he would! he was the only reason Mintspot was sad everyday. At least, that's what Willowkit deduced.

"Yeah, I get it," nodded Lilypetal. "But you need to go out and have fun. You're always keeping yourself to yourself. You've got great loving parents. Beetlejaw talks about you non-stop when we

go on patrols, sometimes, he really can be unbearable." Willowkit perked up. Beetlejaw talked about *her*? She smiled slightly.

"Stormkit will come back one day," said Willowkit. "And we'll all be a happy family then." Lilypetal smiled sadly.

"We searched for him. Mintspot made us send out at least five patrols a day for a moon to look for him. Beetlejaw was on every patrol. But... the Twoleg took him. He's gone. I know, it's a sad truth but he might be having a great kittypet life somewhere else. You don't need to worry about him. If he's not having a great kittypet life then he's watching over you, from StarClan," Lilypetal told Willowkit gentle. Willowkit frowned.

"You think?" she murmured.

"Yes, of course," nodded Lilypetal. "Are you excited to become an apprentice? Three more moons to go."

"Oh yeah," said Willowkit although she had never thought about it. She hadn't even been counting how old she was. She was surprised Lilypetal knew.

"Who do you want to be your mentor?" asked Lilypetal.

"You," replied Willowkit without thinking. It was true. Lilypetal was the only warrior to have approached her in a long time besides Beetlejaw and she was extremely kind and nice.

"How about Gorsestar? What do you think of being the leader's apprentice?" asked Lilypetal. Willowkit's eyes went wide.

"How is that even possible?" she exclaimed.

"Oh it is. But only if Gorsestar really thinks you've got potential," said Lilypetal. Willowkit deflated. Gorsestar would never see anything in her. She always hid from him whenever she saw him. The confident way in which he walked and talked. The way he looked at every cat in concern and care. Willowkit didn't understand it. She was scared that if he ever looked at her, the concern and care would suddenly fade from his eyes as he saw her. She was just a scrawny kit after all.

"Then it won't happen," mumbled Willowkit.

"You don't know that," Lilypetal said. "Now why don't you go play?" Willowkit shook her head slightly.

"I want to talk to you," she said almost too softly. Lilypetal gave a small smile.

"Wouldn't you rather play with the younger cats?" Lilypetal urged.

"No," said Willowkit. She preferred hiding in the bush.

Nobody would see her. But she could see everybody.

"Lilypetal!" called a voice. Lilypetal turned to the camp entrance. Sootwhisker was trotting into the clearing, a raven clutched in his mouth. Lilypetal's eyes lit up. Willowkit had seen them cleaning each other. She had deduced that they were mates.

"I've got to go. But you go have fun," Lilypetal said distractedly and just like that she was gone. Unbeknownst to her, Willowkit watched from the shadows until her head was tired and she almost fell asleep. She spotted Beetlejaw and Brownfur entering the camp, talking in low voices together. Beetlejaw kept glancing at the nursery. Willowkit watched them attentively. She wondered what they were talking about. To her the conversation went like this:

"I caught a mouse today!" said Beetlejaw.

"I caught a crow today!" replied Brownfur.

"Let's go to the fresh kill pile," said Beetlejaw.

"Yes. I'm hungry. I went on a border patrol today," agreed Brownfur. A voice broke Willowkit out of her imagination.

"Why are you spying on the Clan?" came an accusing voice. Willowkit turned around, opening her mouth, ready to defend herself. She shut it when she realised it was Mintspot.

"Sorry," mumbled Willowkit, gazing at the ground. She suddenly felt tiny. She wished she could be invisible. Like she normally was.

"There's almost no more food left in the fresh kill pile. Have you eaten today?" asked Mintspot. Her tone was not accusing anymore, just slightly frustrated and maybe a bit understanding as well.

"No..," Willowkit said, shaking her head. Her stomach grumbled in agreement. She wanted to hide her face from embarrassment.

"Well, the rest of the food is for the last border patrol coming back," said Mintspot. "You're not a newborn kit anymore. You can take care of yourself. You don't need me or Beetlejaw to tell you when to eat."

"I'm sorry," mumbled Willowkit.

"Have you talked to Russetstorm?" asked Mintspot. Willowkit knew she should not talk to Russetstorm. It was an unspoken rule. Fear trickled through her. Did Mintspot know?

"N-no," stammered Willowkit. Her stomach growled

angrily once more. She suddenly felt extremely hungry. She wanted to run away and hide.

"You're hungry," said Mintspot. "I didn't finish my finch. It's in the nursery. You can eat the rest of it." Willowkit looked up, hope in her eyes.

"Thanks!" she cried, happily and thankfully. She loved it when her mother was nice to her. She would do anything for her mother to always be kind to her.

"So did you talk to Russetstorm? Don't lie to me. I'm your mother," Mintspot said pointedly then she nuzzled Willowkit once. Willowkit froze. She didn't want to ruin the moment. She had to tread carefully. Her mother had nuzzled her! Her mother had showed affection! Her mother really did love her! She knew it! Now she couldn't ruin it. She wasn't going to disappoint or lie to her mother.

"Yes," said Willowkit. Something changed in Mintspot's eyes but she smiled.

"See, don't lie to me? I'm not going to do anything. What did Russetstorm tell you?" questioned Mintspot.

"About Stormkit," said Willowkit. Mintspot nodded slowly.

"Right. Um why don't you run along to the nursery and finish that finch?" suggested Mintspot lightly. As Willowkit nodded eagerly and brushed past her, Mintspot watched. Willowkit couldn't understand what Mintspot was thinking. The look on her face betrayed nothing. Willowkit only wished it was something good.

# Chapter 9

They reached the first fence and behind, loomed the farmhouse.

"We did it!" exclaimed Rook gleefully.

"I don't like this place," Domino said, flickering his eyes around. He was jittery and nervous. "It hasn't got a good feel."

"Nonsense. There are no such things as feels," said Rook firmly. He sniffed the air. He could smell the strong smell of horse and cow manure, dogs, something cooking, new paint and petrol. He could see that the smell of new paint was coming from the shining car parked in front of the farmhouse.

"Alright we're here," said Domino. "Now let's go home."

"Are you serious? We just got here!" exclaimed Rook. He slipped under the fence and padded towards the car. Domino trotted after him more unsurely but not wanting to be left behind.

"You know this is a bad place!" exclaimed Domino.

"We don't know anything, *yet*," Rook answered. He walked towards the farmhouse and peered into one of the windows. Inside was an old couch with old torn blankets on top. It was dark and messy. Rook made his way towards the kitchen window. Looking inside, it was much more bright. Light from outside streamed through it. A short lady with angry looking hair and eyes was cooking on a messy stove. Packets of food were open everywhere. Rook wrinkled his nose. The cooking food didn't smell especially good.

"Let's go," said Rook. Domino's eyes lit up.

"Great," he sighed in relief. "I'm starving."

"I meant let's go somewhere else in the farm," Rook clarified. Domino groaned but followed Rook. They padded past a large patch of dead grass. Beside them was a paddock with overgrown grass. They trotted down a small dirt path and in front of them loomed a stable. The stable was long and made of wood. It looked in good condition. From inside, Rook could hear many noises. He could hear the clucking of chickens and the snorting of horses. Rook motioned to one of the windows at the stable. He leapt onto a hay bale and climbed towards the window. Domino scrambled after him. Rook wasn't sure what he was looking for but

this place certainly was interesting. Rook peered into the stable from the dirty uncleaned window. Inside, to the right, there were four horse stalls, the only ones in good condition. In each stall was a different horse. There was a bay horse, a fluffy darker bay horse, a grey horse and a chestnut horse. To the other side of the stable, in each stalls were hay bales or all sort of farmer things including forks and saddles. Walking up and down the small aisle were a few chickens. Rook flicked his tail.

"Let's go in," he said. Domino rolled his eyes but didn't complain, even he was slightly intrigued. They wandered to the stable entrance and squeezed inside. The smells were strong. The strongest smell was of horse and horse manure. Then there were the chickens and all the rubbish stacked on the hay bales at the end. The chickens clucked and ignored the new cats but the horses poked their heads over their stalls and neighed loudly, stomping their feet on the ground. Domino looked around in fear.

"I don't think we're welcome," he muttered. Rook took a deep breath. Suddenly, from behind one of the hay bales, leapt out a pale sand coloured cat with green eyes and a missing tail.

"Who are you?" the cat demanded loudly. There was silence. Even the chickens stopped clucking and huddled to one side of the barn.

"I'm um..., Rook. This is Domino," Rook replied as confidently as possible.

"What are you doing here? Are you searching for death?" questioned the cat. From behind him a few other cats appeared from the shadows. One she-cat with a missing eye and a light silver pelt sat beside the pale yellow cat. A dark brown tabby stood behind next to a black cat.

"No. We were just exploring," Rook answered carefully. The cat with a missing tail jumped down and padded towards them. Rook stood his ground. Domino was quivering.

"We're going to die," Domino was muttering under his breath.

"Aren't the rumours enough to keep you away?" Missing tail cat asked.

"I'm sorry!" blurted Domino. "We'll go. Right away!"

"We've got a reputation to keep up," Missing tail cat replied cooly. "We can't let you go."

"We won't hurt you if you don't give us a reason too,"

Rook said bravely although his voice shook. He wanted to see Saffanah and her family one last time. He didn't want them to wonder what had happened to him. He wished he had listened to Domino.

"Ha! Hurt us? We've been hurt," grinned Missing tail cat. "You seem like two very soft cats. Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to see the forest," explained Rook. "From nearer."

"What interests you about the forest?" interrogated Missing tail cat, raising an eyebrow.

"Well um... I don't know... I think I was found there," said Rook.

"Do you know what lives there?" questioned Missing tail cat. Rook shook his head. "The Clans."

"What Clans?" asked Rook, feeling excited.

"Why should I tell you?" shrugged Missing tail cat. He turned around and looked at the cats on the hay bale. "Kill them." Rook's eyes widened. Domino started whimpering.

"Please don't," begged Domino. Rook hated seeing his best friend like this. It was all his fault.

"don't kill him! It was my idea to come here! Kill *me*! Wait no, don't kill me. Don't kill us," Rook cried quickly.

"Kill them," Missing tail cat said more firmly. The cats leapt down from the hay bales and advanced.

# Chapter 10

"I'm going to be the best warrior ever!" announced Snailkit.

"Well I'm going to be the best leader ever!" retorted Acornkit. "And Willowkit can be my deputy." Willowkit beamed with pride while Snailkit stuck his tongue out.

"Keep it down," Mintspot said tiredly.

"I'll be Acornstar, leader of WindClan," grinned Acornkit.

"I'll be Snailstar! Leader of WindClan!" retorted Snailkit.

"Hey," came a voice. Beetlejaw slipped into the nursery and nuzzled Mintspot lovingly.

"How are you?" he asked in a low gentle voice. Mintspot shrugged and licked him on the cheek. Willowkit watched, unable to peel her eyes off them. The love radiated around her. She imagined herself curled up between them. She smiled slightly. Beetlejaw turned and spotted Willowkit. He smiled.

"Hey, how you doing?" he asked. Willowkit grinned and wiggled her tail.

"Good," she said brightly.

"What are you guys playing?" asked Beetlejaw. He padded over to them. Acornkit trotted up to him.

"We're playing WindClan," announced Acornkit proudly. "And I'm Acornstar." Beetlejaw laughed, his eyes sparkled. Willowkit watched in awe. She had never seen him do that. Not with a kit.

"Greetings, Acornstar, from WindClan," Beetlejaw said in a low voice. He bowed down. Acornkit grinned broadly and pushed his chest out in pride.

"I'm Snailstar from ThunderClan!" put in Snailkit. Beetlejaw did the same for Snailkit. Willowkit wanted to jump right in and join in but she could feel Mintspot's eyes on her. She opened her mouth to say something but her voice could not be found. Her mind ran through all the things that could go wrong. She sat back and watched as Beetlejaw chatted with Snailkit and Acornkit until he turned back to Mintspot.

"Have a good day and do go out for a walk," he told her

firmly, licking her on the forehead.

"Yeah," nodded Mintspot. "You too. Be safe." Beetlejaw turned to the kits, flashed a smile and trotted off.

"Let's go outside and play fight!" yelled Acornkit.

"Last one out is the fox!" shouted Snailkit before bounding away. Acornkit raced after him. Willowkit jumped to her feet, about to set off then quickly turned to Mintspot.

"Can I-?" she started. Mintspot wasn't paying attention anymore. Her eyes adjusted and landed on Willowkit as if she was just seeing her.

"Huh? Oh yeah yeah, go ahead," Mintspot nodded not really paying attention. With a giant smile, Willowkit raced after her playmates. They were there outside, waiting for her.

"You're the fox," declared Acornkit. Willowkit didn't mind, as long as she got to play with them. She leapt at them and they growled. They rolled around in the dirt, laughing and snarling. A large paw pushed Snailkit.

"Do you want me to show you a few moves?" asked the cat. It was Fernspring.

"Yes please!" piped in Acornkit and Snailkit. Willowkit nodded and screamed yes in her head. She watched as Fernspring made Acornkit and Snailkit position themselves. She retreated to the shadows. She watched carefully, remembering the crouching position. Fernspring's eyes flickered to her. They reflected pity.

"Do you want to come?" asked Fernspring gently. Willowkit almost glanced back to see if she was asking another kit but instead, she gave a feeble nod. Fernspring motioned for Willowkit to stand next to the other kits.

"Crouch," said Fernspring. Willowkit crouched. She kept her tail low and her stomach just above the ground. "Perfect! Now you are going to push off your back legs and swipe with your front paw like this." Fernspring crouched and swiftly leapt up, slashing at the air with her front paw.

"Wow!" cooed Snailkit. "I bet I can do that."

"I bet I can do it better!" cried Acornkit. He crouched and jumped up, throwing out his front paw. Snailkit giggled as Acornkit lost balance and tumbled to the ground. Willowkit couldn't help but giggle slightly as well then quickly glanced around to see if anybody had seen her.

"Try again," laughed Fernspring. "Don't jump straight up

like that. Concentrate on swiping." Snailkit and Acornkit both started to practise the move. Willowkit eagerly tried it as well, watching her playmates and copying what was right from their movement. She kept doing it until she knew she had got it right. She didn't celebrate the way Acornkit though when he got it right. Nobody had seen her do the move effortlessly. Not even Fernspring. She didn't scream or shout in glee. Inside, she was bursting with happiness. But she had learnt to keep it inside. Not to bring attention to herself. To be invisble.

# Chapter 11

Rook and Domino backed away. Suddenly, the cat with the missing eye hissed angrily and leapt. She bowled into Domino. He squealed like a kitten as she hurled him to the ground. The black cat swiped her unsheathed claws at Rook. He managed to duck.

"Wait!" yelled Rook loudly. For a moment, the cat with a missing eye let go of Domino. He scrambled back with a few patches of missing fur. "What do you want? We can get you what you want." Missing tail cat raised an eyebrow.

"What do you have that I could possibly want?" he asked pointedly.

"I don't know. You tell me. We live with humans. We can get stuff from them. Stuff you can't get," Rook said. His eyes flickered around, looking for an exit. A way to escape.

"Ha. We have humans living in the farmhouse. And we don't need anything from humans," growled Missing tail cat.

"Nothing? N-not even food? Or- or toys? Maybe a blanket?" Rook suggested. He was panting hard, shaking with nerves. He had never been in such danger. Domino cowered behind him, tail between his legs.

"Toys?" boomed Missing tail cat. "Why would we need toys? Finish them."

"I am a Clan cat!" rushed Rook suddenly. He didn't know what he was talking about. The words had just come out. Missing tail cat frowned.

"Really? So what Clan are you?" questioned Missing tail cat. The stable was still. Rook took a deep breath. What Clan was he? What were the Clans? Suddenly, a feeling washed over him. It was like a breeze. Like the wind. A cold wind made it's way into the stable and brushed against Rook's fur.

"WindClan," Rook announced. He waited for the cats to attack. He knew it would come. The intense pain of claws in his sides. The feeling of his blood being drained. But it did not come. Apparently, WindClan did exist.

"Why didn't you just tell us before?" asked Missing tail cat, slightly more friendly now. He motioned for his companions to back

away. Domino slowly stood straighter but he still trembled with fear.

"I wanted to see how you reacted," Rook answered bravely. Seeing how Missing tail cat was reacting, the Clans must be fearsome.

"So tell me, what is your name really?" questioned Missing tail cat. He was more prudent but there was still disbelief in his voice.

"Rookfang," Rook invented. He hoped to God it was a good WindClan name. Fang had been the most scary thing he could think of. Missing tail cat nodded slowly. He nodded towards Domino.

"How about you, trembling cat?" asked Missing tail cat. Rook could hardly breath, waiting for Domino's answer. Domino though, raked up all the courage he could muster and stood straight.

"I am Spiderclaw," he announced in a loud voice. Missing tail cat looked slightly more convinced.

"Why are you here?" cut in the cat with one eye. Missing tail cat gave her a stern look.

"No the real question is, how are you Rookfang when you look like you're just a kit?" Missing tail cat said in a mocking tone. Rook didn't know how to answer that. "And how can you be Spiderclaw? At the most you would be an apprentice. Spiderpaw." Rook had no idea what Missing tail cat was talking about. Suddenly, the stable door was opened with a loud crack. Two men trudged in. Without missing a heartbeat, Rook and Domino shot out of the stable. Missing tail cat gave an angry yell. He shot after them, dodging the human feet. Rook raced down the dirt road and past the farmhouse. Domino was right after him. The wind howled in their ears. The slipped under the fence and bounded across the field. In a single leap, they crossed the river. They weaved through the sunflowers, keeping together. Their ears were flat to their heads and their feet pounded the ground. Domino's heart bumped in his chest but he couldn't help but feel elevated. Rook wanted to yell with exhilaration. Adrenaline pumped through Rook's veins. Finally, they reached the street. With a yell of triumph, they scrambled over the fence and into Rook's garden. Rook sped to the front door and slipped into the cat flap. Domino was right after him. To Rook's relief, on the couch was Saffanah. She was watching television. She

turned to the cats, surprised. Rook jumped onto the couch beside her and snuggled against her arm. He breathed heavily, smiling with relief. Domino trotted to Saffanah's foot and slumped to the ground. He was panting hard, unable to believe what had just happened.

"Oh my gosh! That was awesome!" Rook said through big breaths.

"You're delusional," replied Domino, rolling onto his back. "I am never doing that again. I almost died. I almost died. Oh my gosh I almost died!" Domino leapt up in panic. He ran to the front door and then up onto a chair and onto the window sill. He peered outside.

"What if they're waiting outside for me?" he whimpered.

"Of course not," replied Rook. "Don't be silly."

"Missing tail cat was chasing us!" answered Domino.

"You can stay here tonight, if you want. And I'll go back to your house with you tomorrow," promised Rook. Domino jumped off the windowsill and padded to Saffanah. She reached down. He shrank away but let her gently pat him on the head.

"Hey," she said softly. "Who are you? Don't be scared. I'm not going to hurt you." Domino slowly sat up straight and purred as she ran her fingers through his fur.

"This is who you have to live with?" asked Domino in disbelief. "Lucky. She's great." Saffanah smiled and tickled Domino under the chin.

"You're pretty. A bit chubby though," giggled Saffanah. Domino looked slightly hurt.

"I'm not chubby! I'm just a bit big on the belly," replied Domino. Diana walked out of the kitchen. She frowned when she saw Domino.

"What's this cat doing in our house?" she asked.

"He came running in with Rook," answered Saffanah. "Isn't he cute?"

"Isn't that the Porter's cat?" asked Diana.

"I don't know," shrugged Saffanah.

"You can't let random cats in without telling me. Go wash your hands," Diana scolded gently.

"But he's Rook's friend," pouted Saffanah.

"Brook isn't allowed to let other cats in. I think we're going to get that electric cat flap," said Diana thoughtfully. Then

she waved her hands at Domino. Domino just took a step back.

"I'm not going out!" Domino said.

"You've got to. I'll go with you," Rook said.

"We're not going to be able to fend ourselves," Domino replied.

"We'll go by the roof," decided Rook. "They don't live here. They won't be able to know where they're going. We live here. We know this place by heart."

"Fine. But what if you die on the way back?" Domino said.

"I won't," Rook said firmly. "Let's go." Diana watched as the cats fled upstairs. She threw her hands in the air.

"Really? No! Rook, get down- stupid cats," Diana said frustrated. She marched after them. Rook led Domino to Saffanah's room and to her window. It was open to let air in. From there, he leapt onto a beam holding the roof and climbed onto the tiles of the roof. Nimbly, Domino followed him. From there, they leapt from roof to roof until they finally reached Domino's roof. Diesel was barking once more. He barked and wagged his tail as he spotted them.

"I didn't remember how much I hate that dog," sighed Domino, slipping into the attic. Rook smiled. They sat on the sofa, staring out of the window, still processing what had happened.

"I'm sorry I made you go. I almost got us both killed," apologised Rook.

"You really did," agreed Domino. "But... I guess it was interesting. And sort of exhilarating. I've never felt like that."

"Me neither. It's kinda great," agreed Rook. "We should do it more often."

"I agree with that except the dying part. Let's explore the other side of the town. Where there aren't serial killers," Domino said. Rook smiled.

"Sure," he said. "Tomorrow."

# Chapter 12

Beetlejaw and Pigeonflight finally entered the clearing. Acornkit and Snailkit let out happy cries and rushed to their father. Willowkit lingered behind, not sure about what to do. Beetlejaw padded towards her. Her face lit up.

"Hey, how was your day?" he asked.

"Great!" squealed Willowkit. "I played with Acornkit and Snailkit." Beetlejaw nodded just as the leader, Gorsestar, padded by. He stopped when he spotted Beetlejaw.

"Beetlejaw, do you think you could lead the patrol tomorrow morning?" asked Gorsestar. Beetlejaw nodded.

"Of course," he said.

"Mostly patrol the ShadowClan border, more ShadowClan cats have been spotted lingering there," explained Gorsestar.

"Will do," nodded Beetlejaw. "I'll make the patrol now." With that, he trotted away. Willowkit slipped back towards the nursery where Mintspot would be waiting for her. Gorsestar stopped her, putting a paw in her path. She had averted her eyes away from the leader at other times, used to being invisible. But this time, she looked up.

"How are you doing?" asked Gorsestar kindly.

"G-good," replied Willowkit in a small voice.

"I know it must be hard losing Stormkit. For both you and your parents," continued Gorsestar. "Just remember to have fun sometimes."

"Ok," said Willowkit. Gorsestar gave her a final nod and she swiftly slipped into the nursery. Mintspot was there, propped up against the wall. Her fur was normally messy and dirty. Nobody said anything. They knew that she had stopped caring a long time ago. Willowkit trotted up to her. Mintspot didn't even notice, she was staring into the distance.

"Oh Stormkit," she was mumbling. Willowkit tilted her head and pricked her ears. "I wish you were here." Willowkit bit her lip then quickly slipped back out of the nursery. She walked around the shadowy parts of Clan, trying and succeeding not to be seen. She passed Acornkit and Snailkit, chattering to Pigeonflight as he smiled

at them lovingly. Without realising, Willowkit found herself in front of the elder's den. Russetstorm was dozing in the elder's den. Willowkit watched silently. She felt bad. She wondered how it would be to be living all alone in a den. She remembered that there used to be another elder. His name had been Antpelt but he had died when she had been tiny. Russetstorm opened an eye.

"Oh hi Willlowkit," Russetstorm greeted.

"Hi," said Willowkit, almost jumping in surprise.

"Are you here to ask me about that night?" sighed Russetstorm. Willowkit frowned. Was she really that much of a nuisance? She wasn't about to ask any questions. She'd rather just watch. She hated that Russetstorm, the cat who had told her literally all she knew about her brother, hated her.

"No. I was just walking around," replied Willowkit in a small voice.

"Well, if you were going to ask me, just know that I'm not going to tell you. I'm sorry. I can't. You know that. Your mother must have told you not to ask me," Russetstorm said. Willowkit made a face. She didn't understand what Russetstorm was talking about.

"Ask you about what?" Willowkit asked.

"Did she not tell you?" sighed Russetstorm. "I'm sorry. I'm just not supposed to tell you about that night. Your mother's orders." Willowkit processed the information. She knew her mother never talked about the night she and her brother were born. She hadn't thought much about it. Maybe she just didn't want to talk about it, it hurt too much. But now..., with what Russetstorm said..., maybe there was another reason. Something happened that night that Mintspot didn't want Willowkit to know about. Suddenly, Willowkit felt curiosity like never before. She needed to know what had happened that night. She wanted to know exactly what had happened. She had the right to know too. It was the night she had been born. It was the night her brother had been taken. She blinked and snapped out of her thoughts.

"Thanks. I've got to go now," Willowkit said firmly. "Bye." She was almost in awe of herself. She had never dismissed herself from another cat. Other cats always did it to her. She had never spoken that bravely either, only to the other kits. She walked off confidently. More confidently than ever. Something was different in her. And although she still shrunk away as other cats walked by,

she now had something else. She had a purpose. She had a goal. She wasn't just walking around because she existed and there was nothing else to do. She was walking around with an intention. An intention to find out what really happened that night. What happened that had changed her relationship with Mintspot. What had changed everything.

# Chapter 13

Rook padded downstairs beside Saffanah for breakfast. Jeremy and Diana were at the table eating breakfast. It was a Sunday and Jeremy did not have work. Saffanah rushed to give Jeremy a hug while Diana gave her a peck on the head. Jeremy sipped a cup of coffee while Diana had prepared a bowl of milk and cereal for Saffanah. Diana was sipping from a hot cup of tea. Rook brushed against Diana's leg in good morning while Jeremy scratched him on the ear. Rook trotted to the kitchen and lapped up his food. He took a few drops of water then padded back into the living room. He sat on the sofa, staring in front of him but still listening to the conversation of the family.

"Saffanah," Jeremy was saying. "I've got very very good news."

"What is it?" asked Saffana eagerly. Diana chuckled.

"I've gotten promoted in my job," announced Jeremy.

"What does that mean?" asked Saffanah.

"It means that now, I'm more important in my job and we will get more money so we will go on better holidays. And not just that, we might get to move to London!" Jeremy exclaimed. "How great is that?"

"London?" cried Saffanah. "Yay!" Rook pricked his ears as he heard some scratching at the door. Swiftly, he slipped off the couch and towards the cat flap. He pushed it and stepped outside. He almost had a heart attack. Standing on the doorstep was Missing tail cat. Rook squeaked and jumped back. He hit his head on the door. Missing tail cat hissed. There were loud footsteps and Rook felt warm hands grab him. He knew them as Jeremy's. He could have yelled in relief. Jeremy put him down on the ground gently.

"Clumsy cat," he laughed.

"Rook!" cooed Saffanah. Jeremy tickled Rook under the chin then walked back to the table. Rook shook himself. He had to warn Domino. Domino could be next. He was safe as long as he stayed inside with his family but if he attempted to go outside, he was scared that Missing tail cat might kill him. He couldn't believe Missing tail cat had followed them all the way back. Domino would

freak out. Rook paced around, thinking hard.

"He looks so thoughtful!" laughed Diana.

"He's probably thinking about what's going to be for dinner," nodded Jeremy. Rook wasn't listening. Missing tail cat was outside, waiting to kill him. His whole house could be surrounded for all he knew. There was a small tap of claws outside. Rook felt shivers down his spine.

"Get out here Rook," came Missing tail cat's chilling voice. Rook stopped in his track and almost froze in fright. What was taking over him? He shook himself. He wouldn't be scared. He wouldn't let Missing tail cat know he was afraid. He was safe. He had Jeremy and Diana with him. Even Saffanah. Nothing could possibly happen.

"Come on scaredy cat," Missing tail cat's voice came once more. Rook didn't get scared this time. He was glad Missing tail cat couldn't come in. "I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to talk." Rook scoffed. As if. There was a pause.

"Aw come on kid. I can't kill you. Your humans are here. I'm not going to risk it. Just poke your head out. Or just talk to me from the other side of the flap," Missing tail cat said. Rook sighed. He didn't want to get hurt but the curiosity still overpowered him. He padded to the flap.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Just wanted to talk to you about yesterday," Missing tail cat said. "I-I need your help." Rook's eyes almost popped out. Did Missing tail cat really think he was that stupid?

"Ha, get out," Rook snapped.

"I'm not kidding ok? Yesterday, those two men came into the stable and they took Linda, Mochi and Snap," Missing tail cat said.

"Wow. Leave. Now."

"Please. I need you to help me. They're being kept in the barn. The- the slaughter barn. They're going to die. I don't want them to die. Do you?"

"Um, the world would be just fine without them. We'd be just fine without them. Thank you very much but now kindly leave." Rook almost rolled his eyes at Missing tail cat's stupid request.

"You can't just let them die!" wailed Missing tail cat.

"If I recall, you were about to watch us die by their claws

just yesterday," retorted Rook.

"We weren't going to *kill* you. Just harm you," Missing tail cat justified.

"Mhmmm. Totally," Rook said unbelievingly. "Leave or I'm going to let my humans know you're here." Missing tail cat snickered.

"Look, I'll give you what you want in return," Missing tail cat said.

"And what is that?"

"Information. About the Clans."

"The Clans? I don't care about them," scoffed Rook.

"But you said that was where you cam from."

"The forest. Not the Clans."

"Yes, the forest is owned by the Clans. You can't come from the forest and not be part of the Clans," Missing tail cat explained frustratedly. "You even said it yourself, you're WindClan." Rook rolled his eyes.

"If you hadn't realised, I live with humans. I'm not part of a Clan," Rook answered.

"Yes but I saw the way you ran yesterday. As swiftly as a WindClan cat, there's no mistaking it," Missing tail cat answered smoothly.

"I'm not helping you. It's final. How do I know this is not all a trick? Even if it isn't, you tried to kill me. And I don't care about the Clans. I may dream of where I came from sometimes, but in all honesty, I don't care. I have a good life. I have a good family. Where I came from does not matter," Rook replied firmly and calmly. He meant every word.

"Oh but it does," Missing tail cat said slyly. "Because somewhere in that forest. In WindClan. There are cats mourning for you. Cats that miss you. Cats that don't know that you're a kittypet." Rook wrinkled his nose. Kittypet didn't sound like a nice word.

"Kittypet?" he growled.

"Yes. A human pet," Missing tail cat sneered. "And don't you want to meet your mother? Father? Brothers? Sisters?"

"No," replied Rook flatly. "Leave." With that, swivelled around and trotted to the couch. He leapt onto it and curled into a ball. He closed his eyes and let himself doze off. He ignored the angry scratching of Missing tail cat. He ignored it when Missing tail cat started yelling insults. He even ignored Jeremy when Jeremy

swung open the door and shooed Missing tail cat away.

# Chapter 14

Domino let out a loud high pitched laugh. He was hysterical.

"I'm getting scared now," Rook said, making a face as Domino was still laughing after five minutes.

"Sorry," gasped Domino. "Nervous laughter."

"Yeah, I realised," nodded Rook.

"You've got to be kidding me. Please tell me this is a nightmare," Domino begged.

"I'm not kidding. Missing tail cat was at my door," Rook sighed. Domino took deep breaths.

"Ok ok ok. It's ok Domino. Don't freak out," Domino muttered quickly to himself, breathing quickly. "OH MY GOD ROOK! PLEASE TELL ME YOU'RE KIDDING! DON'T DO THIS TO ME! YOU CAN'T DO THIS TO ME DUDE. I'M FREAKING OUT RIGHT NOW. I'M FREAKING OUT." Rook had never seen his friend like this. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Calm down," said Rook.

"Calm down!?" yelled Domino. "This phsyco followed us back. What if he followed you to my house?! I'm going to have to be an indoor cat *forever*. And that baby will *kill me.* Missing tail cat tried to lure you out!"

"I told you. He was asking for help," Rook explained for the millionth time, calmly.

"And I told *you*. It was a scam," cried Domino. "We're doomed. We're totally doomed. I'm going to die."

"Relax. Domino. *Relax*. Look, nothing bad is going to happen. Missing tail cat's friends are really not here. He can't do anything to us," Rook said confidently.

"How do you know?! He can kill us both by himself. He's just as capable!" retorted Domino. Rook almost sneezed as some dust tickled his nose.

"This attic is dusty!" he muttered.

"Gosh. I should never have gone there," Domino said regretfully, shrinking on the ragged couch. Rook sighed. He didn't like seeing his friend like this. Especially knowing he had been the cause of it.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Just promise me you won't worry. Take my word, you're not going to die," Rook said.

"I followed you to that farm. I trusted you," Domino said. Rook felt his heart sink. He wanted to go back in the past. He would do anything to get Domino's trust back. He should never have gone to that farm. It had ruined their friendship. It was cursed.

"I'm sorry," Rook mumbled. "I'm so sorry. I'll make it up to you." Domino took a deep breath.

"No it's alright," he said. "Just go. Please. I need to think." Rook opened his mouth to say more but Domino gave him a fierce look. With a sigh, Rook leapt onto the window sill, giving Domino one last look. Domino was staring at the ground, not even noticing Rook anymore. Sadly, Rook slipped out of the cat flap and walked on the wooden beam outside. A loud bark erupted. Rook growled and hissed.

"This isn't the right time Diesel!" snarled Rook angrily. He leapt onto the pipe of the next house and then scrambled on the roof. Finally, he jumped onto a few bins next to the house and then landed on the ground. He walked through the streets. The gravel pricked Rook's feet. He didn't care. He hated the sound and smell of cars as they zoomed past him but he didn't care. He just kept walking sadly. He couldn't believe that his friendship with Domino was over. Domino would get over it. But would he? Domino had risked his life for Rook. Rook cursed himself for being so stupid. He regretted every decision leading up to the visit to the farm. Finally, he turned the street corner and found his house. He didn't have the energy to climb. Instead, he slipped under the fence where there was a small ditch, made just for him. He padded absent-mindedly towards the door. He jumped. His eyes widened. His heart raced. Missing cat tail stood at the door step. His lips curled into a smile.

"Hey," he said. "So..., have you changed your mind? Is little scaredy cat Domino going to come as well?"

"NO. No, I haven't changed my mind. And Domino isn't coming," snapped Rook. Instead of fear, anger bubbled through him. His friendship with Domino had been ruined over Missing tail cat. He wanted to rip Missing tail cat's face off. Missing tail cat sensed this in Rook. Rook growled, his fur bristled.

"Get out of my house. Leave," snarled Rook angrily, lashing his tail. "I don't want you here. Don't let me see you ever again." Missing tail cat gave Rook a long look.

"You really are a warrior," he murmured under his breath. Rook spat.

"What was that?" he demanded.

"If you say so. I won't ever come back to your house. But I can't say the same for Domino," grinned Missing tail cat. Rook growled. Nobody was going to hurt his friend. Maybe they weren't even friends anymore. But Domino was Rook's best friend, no matter what Domino thought. Rook cared about Domino.

"You're sidekicks aren't here for you now," growled Rook. "I'm going to kill you." And at that moment he meant it. His muscles were burning, aching to jump. His claws were unsheathed. Anger pulsed through his body. With a horrific snarl, Rook leapt.

# Chapter 15

Willowkit woke up to Mintspot snoring gently. Quietly, Willowkit padded towards the nursery entrance. Mintspot opened an eye. Willowkit stopped in her tracks. Mintspot blinked then changed position, curling up into a small ball. Willowkit slipped outside. The sun had just begun rising. Beetlejaw and his patrol were talking quietly by the camp entrance. Willowkit tilted her head, watching them silently. Then she trotted towards the cover of bushes and shadows. There, she made her way towards the camp entrance and to the warrior's den. She stood just beside the warrior's den, watching as Beetlejaw finally led the patrol outside. Willowkit shuffled on her spot and lay down. She waited. Finally, the soon rose fully, birds chirped and cats started to wake. The first one out of the warrior's den was Lizardpelt. Lizardpelt glanced at Willowkit then padded towards the fresh-kill pile. Then Halestorm and Bluewing emerged from the warrior's den. They conversed briefly together and waited at the camp entrance. A few moments later, their bleary eyed apprentices trotted up to them. They greeted each other warmly and tiredly and then slipped out of camp. Willowkit watched and listened. It was great, being invisible. Finally, the warrior Willowkit had been waiting for. Brownfur emerged from the warrior's den. His muscles rippled under his thick brown fur. His ears were sharp and he walked with confidence. Willowkit had always admired him. As he made his way towards the camp entrance, Willowkit couldn't find the strength to run up to him. That wasn't what she did. She didn't run up to cats and catch their attention. She just stood, invisible and sometimes other cats would get her attention. But she had a purpose now. She was going to find out everything that had happened that night. Taking a deep breath, Willowkit bounded towards Brownfur. He heard her small footsteps behind him and turned around. His whiskers twitched at the sight of her.

"Hello Willowkit, how are you?" he asked in a deep voice. Brownfur had not talked to Willowkit. He had passed by the nursery a few times, when she had only been a few days old, but after that, he had kept away from her, Mintspot and even Beetlejaw.

"Hi Brownfur," Willowkit said in a small voice. Brownfur's eyes flickered to the nursery.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded Willowkit. "I wanted to ask you a question."

"Yes, tell me," Brownfur said.

"Um..., it's about the day I was born," Willowkit said slowly. Brownfur's face turned serious. He nodded without betraying any emotion.

"Why don't you ask your mother about that?" he said as gently as he could. He was about to turn around. Willowkit did something she had never thought she would do. She ran up to him and yelled, "Stop. Wait!"

"I have to go hunt," Brownfur told her.

"Please tell me," begged Willowkit. "I need to know." Brownfur stood still for a moment. He thought. Willowkit watched him with hopeful eyes.

"I'll tell you," he said finally. "But not now. I'm busy. Tonight. Maybe." With that, he swivelled around and slipped out of camp. Willowkit's body buzzed with excitement. She had done it. She wanted to jump up in victory and yell, but that would bring too much attention to her. Keeping her head low, she trotted back towards the nursery. Suddenly, something bowled into her. Willowkit squeaked.

"Hey," grinned Acornkit, pinning Willowkit down. "Why did you wake up so early." Willowkit wriggled away from his grip and shook herself.

"No reason," she shrugged.

"Do you want to play with me and Snailkit?" asked Acornkit.

"Ok," nodded Willowkit. "But, not now. Sorry." Acornkit sighed.

"Alright," he said and trotted away. Regretfully, Willowkit padded into the nursery. Only Mintspot was there. Mintspot was stretched out on the ground, her eyes open.

"Hi Mintspot," Willowkit said in a small voice.

"Hi," replied Mintspot flatly.

"Are you ok?" asked Willowkit.

"How do you live like that?" asked Mintspot, thought her mind wasn't with Willowkit. It was as if she was talking to somebody else, in another time. But no, her questions were directed

to Willowkit.

"How do you live happy knowing you'll never see or know your brother?" continued Mintspot in a small voice. "I can't live like that."

"I- I know I'm going to find him," whispered Willowkit. "He's ok."

"I never did anything wrong. StarClan shouldn't have done that. They had no right," Mintspot said, breathing heavily. She didn't seem to see Willowkit.

"Why did they take him?" Mintspot sobbed. "Why didn't take me. Anybody, anybody but Stormkit." Willowkit shuffled uneasily. She didn't know who Mintspot was talking to anymore. She know she should run out of the nursery, Mintspot didn't want her hearing this. But this had something to do with Willowkit. Willowkit wasn't leaving. She stood, watching, slightly in horror but she stayed.

"Anybody. Anybody... They could have taken anybody," whispered Mintspot. "They should have taken Willowkit."

# Chapter 16

Rook slashed his claws across Missing tail cat's face. Missing tail cat snarled angrily and swiped back. His claws caught Rook on the ear. Something seemed to take over Rook. With an angry yowl, he jumped up and threw himself on Missing tail cat. They tumbled to the ground. Rook drove his claws into Missing tail cat's sides. He felt them pierce Missing tail cat's sides. Blood flowed out. With a grunt, Missing tail cat threw Rook off.

"Don't do this," Missing tail cat spat. "I won't hurt you. You may have warrior blood but you are by no means trained. I won't hurt you. You just have to help me."

"You won't hurt my best friend either," spat Rook. "Because you'll be dead." Missing tail cat took a deep breath then swiftly lashed out at Rook. Rook felt sharp claws dig into the skin on his cheek. Then he felt his skin open. Burning pain in his face. Blood trickled out. Angrily, Rook hissed and leapt. Missing tail cat dodged. Surprised, but unmoved, Rook twisted around and bit into Missing tail cat's shoulder. He bit as hard as he could. He willed his sharp teeth to cut into Missing tail cat's skin. But before his teeth could pierce the skin, Missing tail cat whipped around and bit into Rook's ear. Then he tugged. Rook felt pain like never before. It seared through his whole body. He thought his ear was about to fall off. He whimpered and let go of Missing tail cat's shoulder. Rook broke free from Missing tail cat's grasp. He felt disorientated. His ear felt slightly floppy. Blood trickled down onto his cheeks. Rook lunged for Missing tail cat. Missing tail cat managed to duck and slice Rook down his side. This time, Rook fought through the pain and caught Missing tail cat's tail. He tugged hard. He felt his teeth pierce into skin and tighten on muscle. Missing tail cat grunted and threw Rook on the ground. He pinned him down. Rook struggled as Missing tail cat started to claw at his stomach.

"Hey! Get off! Piss off!" hollered an angry voice. Missing tail cat stopped and glanced up. Jeremy was charging towards them. Rook threw Missing tail cat off and hissed, lashing his tail.

"Don't you dare hurt my friend!" snarled Rook. "Next time, I'll kill you." Missing tail cat gave him a cold look.

"The offer still stands, until my friends are dead. I know about where you came from, remember that," Missing tail cats said softly. Jeremy reached the end of the garden and kicked Missing tail cat. Missing tail cat snapped angrily at Jeremy's ankle before fleeing. Rook collapsed to the ground. He wished he could tell Jeremy how grateful he was. Jeremy scooped him up gently in his arms.

"Oh Rook....., look at you," he mumbled. He brought Rook back to the house. Diana rushed to him.

"What happened? Oh my gosh, is he alright?" Diana gasped.

"We have to bring him to the vet," Jeremy said.

"I'll call her now," nodded Diana and rushed for the phone.

"Saffanah is going to be devastated," sighed Jeremy.

"Right let's take him to the vet. They're open," Diana said quickly. They brought Rook to the car and spread him on a small blanket on the back seat. Rook's eyes were barely open. He felt so tired. More tired than ever. But he couldn't sleep. He wanted to stay awake. His body ached and his muscles were crying out in pain. Rook felt the ground rumble. He felt his body shake. There was a roar and he felt as if they were lurching forward. The grumble was persistant throughout the whole journey. Until finally, Diana swung open the car door and fresh air blew in. Rook took a deep gulp of fresh air. Diana took him gently in his arms. Jeremy locked the car doors and they ran towards the vet. Rook felt like he was being thrown up and down as Diana ran. The wind whistled in his ears. The wind ruffled his fur. It felt good. He felt himself slipping. Then the air changed. It had a strange, sterile tinge. Rook could sense other animals. But they weren't exactly healthy. The air tasted weird.

"Hello, can we please see a vet now?" Jeremy asked urgently, leaning onto the front desk. The young man with bored looking eyes took his eyes of the computer screen.

"Our cat got into a fight," pressed Diana. The receptionist's eyes went to Rook. He suddenly was more sharp.

"Oh yeah of course. The vet's ready for you. I'll bring you to her," he said quickly, standing up. He led Jeremy and Diana down a corridor and into a room. A woman with her hair tied up and a happy smile strode to them.

"Hello, you must be Diana," she said. "Oh and this is the

cat. Oh my. Please place him on the table." Rook felt his body being lifted. He was placed on something unnatural and hard. HE let out a small meow of protest. Rook felt his eyelids closing. His body was falling asleep. He was too tired. He fell into oblivion.

# Chapter 17

Willowkit stayed curled up in a ball in the cover of a bush the whole day. Her stomach grumbled by afternoon, angry for food. She ignored it. She kept her head buried in her paws. She trembled. She couldn't believe what she had heard. She always knew something had made Mintspot like that. She always knew that Mintspot hadn't always been depressed and grumpy. She hadn't known, hadn't ever thought that it was because Mintspot wished she had disappeared instead of Stormkit. I should have guessed, she told herself softly, I'm nothing. I'm nobody. I'm invisible. Who'd want me as a kit. Willowkit didn't know why she was sulking. She shouldn't be sulking. She shouldn't have expected herself to be better than her brother. Nothing made her better than him. He deserved to be here. He deserved to be in WindClan, living a good kit life, not somewhere with Twolegs. The more she thought about it, the more sure she was. Mintspot was right. It had been a mistake. The Twoleg should have taken her. Then her family would be happy. Stormkit, Mintspot and Beetlejaw. The happiest family on earth. Willowkit was stopping that. She was stopping it from happening. She didn't want to stop her parents from being happy. She wished she could change it. But she couldn't. So, to make it up for Mintspot, she would be a good kit. She wouldn't play. She would behave herself. She wouldn't ask questions. She would do everything Mintspot told her to do. Yes, she thought, that's right. That's what Mintspot wants. She wants me to stay quiet. I will. I will show her that I can be a good kit. Almost as good as Stormkit. Then she cursed herself. She shouldn't be comparing herself to her brother. She sighed.

"What are you doing?" asked Acornkit, peering into the bushes. Willowkit jumped.

"Huh? nothing," she replied quickly.

"Do you want to play?" he asked.

"No," replied Willowkit flatly. "I'm going to the nursery. Acornkit watched dumfounded as Willowkit brushed past him and padded towards the nursery. Mintspot was lying on the ground. Her eyes focused on Willowkit as Willowkit slipped in. Mintspot looked away, ready to answer another one of Willowkit's questions.

Instead, Willowkit curled up into a ball and stayed there. Willowkit was going to be a good kit. Mintspot had always tried to teach Willowkit to be a good kit. That meant lying down and not making a sound. So that's why she did. She stayed quiet and stayed still. Her mind flew off.

"What are you doing?" asked Mintspot, breaking the silence. She was surprised to see Willowkit inside. She expected Willowkit to go out and play with the other kits, or just hang about in the background. She hated that Willowkit never talked for herself to the other kits. She hated that Willowkit never talked to the other warriors. She knew what every warrior was whispering. That her kit was messed up. Couldn't Willowkit just be a bit braver? More confident? But now, she was just lying there, alone, not doing anything. Mintspot didn't mind. If Willowkit was going to be shy, she'd rather Willowkit just stay quiet away from other cats. It wasn't good for Willowkit to see other cats so happy. She could never be like that. Her brother had disappeared. She couldn't be happy knowing that. Mintspot sighed. Her thoughts flickered back to that night. They always did. Everything went wrong that night. Sometimes, Mintspot had nightmares at night. Both her kits were taken by five large Twolegs, waving big sticks and yelling loudly. In her nightmares, Mintspot would try and save her kits, but Brownfur, Antpelt and Russetstorm held her down. She had to watch as her kits were thrown into dark cages and blood filled her vision. Willowkit looked up at Mintspot as she spoke.

"Just lying down," Willowkit said softly.

"Alright," nodded Mintspot. She forced herself to smile. After all, Willowkit hadn't done anything wrong. Quite the opposite. Mintspot heaved herself up. She then walked towards the nursery entrance, dragging her leg behind. She hated it. It was like ugly dead meat. She hated seeing it limp like that and all twisted. It made her sick. She wished it could just disappear. She wished she had died. She wouldn't need to lay eyes on her twisted ugly leg anymore. She wouldn't have to see Willowkit anymore and be reminded of Stormkit. Be reminded of all her mistakes. Everything she could have done to save him. Everything she could still do to save Willowkit but she couldn't bring herself to do it. Because everytime she saw Willowkit, it reminded her of that night. And everytime she saw Willowkit she could see Stormkit in her. Just the smaller, shier and more useless Stormkit. She couldn't betray

Stormkit by favouring Willowkit. She couldn't betray Stormkit by letting Willowkit be happy. How would he feel, knowing his family was happy without him? No, that was out of the question. Mintspot took a deep gulp of fresh air outside of the den. Her thoughts were mixed up. Everything was mixed up. Part of her just ignored Willowkit, as a default. The other part, the softer, almost saner part, screamed against it. Nuzzle her. Play with her. Teach her. Tell her you love her. She never listened to her softer part. She never told Willowkit she loved her.

# Chapter 18

"Rook needs to take it easy for the rest of the week," Jeremy told Saffanah. Rook watched, sitting at the window sill. He was still slightly tired but his cuts did not hurt that much anymore. Jeremy held a basket.

"Ok," nodded Saffanah. "I'll take care of him."

"Good girl," smiled Jeremy, rubbing her forehead. Inside the basket was a white pillow. Jeremy placed the basket on the window seat beside Rook.

"He's going to sleep in this basket for a few nights as well," Jeremy added. Diana was leaning against the doorway.

"Why?" asked Saffanah. "I want him to sleep with me."

"He can't darling. He's got to take it easy. And you know you move a lot when you sleep. It might not be the best idea for both of you to sleep on the same bed. And he's got wounds..., we don't want you to get any unnecessary bacterias," explained Diana. Jeremy scratched Rook's head.

"You're ok sleeping in the basket, aren't you?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure," Rook shrugged. Saffanah padded over to Rook and pet him lovingly. Rook purred, smiling at her brightly.

"Who was that cat?" asked Diana.

"I have no idea. Never seen it," Jeremy shrugged, scratching his head.

"Rook's never gotten into a fight," Diana said.

"I know. Maybe this cat is trying to cause trouble. We really should get those electronic cat flaps," Jeremy said.

"Yes. I told you, I already found a few online. We don't want other cats coming into our house either," agreed Diana.

"You know, what was weird, the cat fighting with Rook had a missing tail," Jeremy sighed. "As if he had already gotten into many fights."

"I'm glad Rook made it out alive," nodded Diana. "Well, dinner's ready in ten minutes. Saffanah, wash your hands." Saffanah nodded. Her parents walked out of the room, making plans about something called a SureFlap.

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Rook yawned. He was curled up in the basket, listening as his family ate dinner. He didn't have the energy to join them. He liked the basket. It was right next to the window. He could just peer outside and stare as he rested. He hear soft footsteps. Light. A cat's footsteps. His eyes snapped to the door. Entering Saffanah's room was Domino. Rook almost jumped but sighed in relief. He was glad it wasn't Missing tail cat although he was scared what Domino wanted. He hoped Domino wasn't here to yell at him again.

"How did you get in?" was the first thing Rook could say.

"Snuck in," replied Domino. He leapt onto the window sill next to Rook. "You alright?"

"Yeah. Went to the vet. Fell asleep so I didn't really feel anything the whole time," shrugged Rook.

"Thanks," Domino blurted. Rook tilted his head.

"Thanks?" he repeated. "Why?"

"You're a hero," continued Domino. "I can't believe you fought Missing tail cat. For me."

"Oh thanks. H-how do you know?" asked Rook.

"He told me," Domino said.

"Told you?"

"Yeah. Missing tail cat *told* me."

"What do you mean? How did he- what?"

"Yeah. I saw him walking by my house. Diesel saw him first, I mean. He started barking like crazy. I looked out of the attic window and there he was. He was messed up of course. He had like blood everywhere. He saw me and he climbed to the attic. Obviously, I was freaking out but it did look like he was going to die so I wasn't *too* scared. I could smell *you* on *him.* That was when I knew you were the one who had damaged him like that. I didn't let him in of course but he talked from outside the flap. He said you got mad when he threatened to hurt me. And then he said that you defended me and then you fought him."

"But why would he say that? He hates us."

"Apparently he loves friendship. He said that he admired what you did for me. He said he could see we had a great friendship. So he told me that I should forgive you. Of course, I was going to forgive you anyways. Like in a few months, when I forgot about the farm. But when I heard you were hurt and rushed to the

vet, I came to see you right when you got back. He also said that friendships are important."

"Oh..., well... I guess we didn't really know him, did we?" Rook frowned.

"No, I guess not. But he still did try to kill us. So let's not give him too much credit," Domino said. Rook smiled.

"I'm sorry. I really am," Rook apologised.

"I know. I'm sorry too. And I forgive you," Domino replied.

"I guess it's over with Missing tail cat now," Rook said, rather relieved.

"Well, not quite. I rethought about it. And I thought about it a lot," Domino said slowly. "And I think we should help him."

"Help him?" exclaimed Rook. "we can't do that. Are you crazy?"

"But why not? He'll tell you about the Clans. Where you came from. Plus, we might make a few less enemies," Domino explained.

"Are you kidding?" Rook asked seriously. "You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not kidding. For the first time in my life, well not *first* time, but for a rare time in my life, I'm not kidding. I'm serious. We should. I've thought it over. We can do it. I mean, did you see how fast we ran. And you can fight off Missing tail cat," Domino said.

"I didn't. Jeremy chased him away in the end," Rook corrected. "You can't be serious. I'm not allowed to do anything for a week."

"Then you rest. We'll do it when we're ready," Domino shrugged.

"His friends are going to be dead by then," Rook pointed out.

"Maybe, maybe not," Domino said. "We don't know. But if they are, we can help them."

"Let's say, I said yes, how are you going to tell Missing tail cat we changed our minds. It's not like we know where he lives," Rook said.

"At the farm," replied Domino easily.

"Yes but he doesn't live there anymore, does he? The men want to kill him."

"He told me where he was. At the end of the sunflower field. So it's a yes."

"No. I didn't say it was a yes."

"You said, let's say I said yes...."

"But I didn't say yes."

"You just did." Rook glared at Domino.

"Come on. Trust me. You asked me to trust you when we went to the farm. I trusted you. Now you've got to trust me," Domino said seriously, holding Rook's gaze. Rook turned away, thinking. He couldn't do it. He didn't want to fight for anything else. But the look his friend was giving him. Trust me. He trusted him. He trusted Domino. Domino really wanted it. He'd do it for Domino.

"I'll do it. But honestly, why do you want to do it anyways, I don't care about the Clans," Rook finally said. Domino looked triumphant.

"Thank you!" grinned Domino. "And if you don't want to know where you came from, I do. I'm sure you're going to be curious, once he starts talking."

"What do you want to live with the Clans?" teased Rook. Domino looked serious though.

"Maybe."

# Chapter 19

Willowkit didn't think about her mission anymore. She didn't have the energy or will. She didn't even want to think of asking anybody anything. She cringed everytime she thought of the time she had just strode up to Brownfur and demanded answers, now she just stayed in the nursery. She didn't go out to eat. Only rarely to drink. If she thought Brownfur was coming, she would flee back into the nursery and cower. She didn't know what had come over her. She hated feeling so incapable and weak. She hated that she ran away from the thought of Brownfur. She wished she could just be strong. Just be normal. But she couldn't. Mintspot didn't seem to notice Willowkit although everytime she had to talk to Willowkit, she seemed more light and less mad. That was the only good thing. Mintspot wasn't getting mad at her anymore. Beetlejaw though was getting more and more mad.

"Why can't you just play with the other kits? Like a *normal* kit?" He'd asked her in exasperation. She'd shrink away and whisper a small answer. Beetlejaw would sigh. All Willowkit could think about was the words Mintspot had said. Not just thought, she had said. Willowkit should have been taken instead of Stormkit. So that was how Willowkit acted. She didn't care about anything anymore. She was still invisible but she didn't eat when her stomach grumbled, she didn't think about living with a happy family. Because her family didn't love her. Her family never would. Willowkit was huddled beside the nursery, hiding in a bracken bush. A cold wind blew. She didn't care. She shivered slightly with the cold but didn't budge. Her eyes were half closed.

"Why are you so depressed these days?" sighed a voice. Willowkit barely glanced up but she was surprised to see who it was. Mintspot peered at her through the leaves. Willowkit turned her head, what was the point of replying?

"I mean, you shouldn't be jumping for joy, you lost your brother, but since when are you this depressed? Only I'm this depressed," Mintspot seemed to reflect on her own words. "Have you eaten yet? You look bony. You were already skinny before but now we can see your bones. Do you want everybody to think I'm

neglecting you?" Willowkit didn't answer, she wasn't even listening anymore. Whatever Mintspot had to say, Willowkit knew it was lies. Mintspot wished her gone. Wished Stormkit had replaced her.

"I'm going to get you something to eat, don't move..., not that you've moved for hours," Mintspot mumbled under her breath. She returned with a mouse clasped in her jaw. She dropped it at Willowkit's feet.

"Here, eat," Mintspot nudged the mouse to Willowkit. Willowkit's ears pricked at the delicious scent. Her mouth watered. Her tail twitched. She was so hungry. Eagerly, she pounced onto the mouse and started to tear it apart. Mintspot let out a huff and dragged herself back into the den, to think about how depressing her life was. Willowkit licked her lips. Her stomach was much fuller than before. Now she was just thirsty, her mouth and throat dry. Acornkit trotted over to her from the other side of the clearing where Snailkit was talking to the apprentices. He peered at her worriedly.

"Are you alright?" he asked. Willowkit didn't answer. She didn't feel bad, not talking to Acornkit. He probably wished he could play with Stormkit instead. Stormkit would be strong and a much better deputy for Acornkit.

"Why are you sad?" asked Acornkit. Willowkit wanted Acornkit to care. She wanted to believe it. But she had leant not to expect that of cats. She was alone. Nobody cared.

"Go away," muttered Willowkit.

"Do you want me to call Troutfur?" asked Acornkit, not budging. Willowkit shook her head.

"Leave me alone," she murmured.

"Why?" asked Acornkit. "You can play with Snailkit and I."

"Just go," sighed Willowkit.

"Come on. I'll cheer you up," smiled Acornkit encouragingly.

"I don't want to go. You go," retorted Willowkit.

"Why? Are you lazy?" taunted Acornkit. Willowkit glared at him but didn't get up.

"Just go. Maybe I am lazy," Willowkit mumbled.

"You aren't," Acornkit said, his voice softening. "I didn't mean it, when I said you were lazy. You're just sad. Why don't you come and play with us? Your sadness would go away."

"You can't make my sadness fo away," sighed Willowkit. "Nobody can. Except maybe StarClan." Acornkit looked skeptical.

"I can! Let's play," begged Acornkit.

"Go play with Snailkit," muttered Willowkit. "You can't do anything for me." Acornkit wasn't going to budge, Willowkit could see that. "I'll play with you tomorrow." Acornkit thought about it for a moment.

"Promise?" he asked.

"Yeah," nodded Willowkit although she didn't think she would be able to keep the promise. "I promise."

"Alright. Thanks," beamed Acornkit. "Don't be sad." He trotted away.

"I can't just not be sad," muttered Willowkit. She curled up into a ball and closed her eyes. She puffed out her fur from the wind. Her whole body was numb from cold but something inside her had sparked. She wasn't as sad as before. Her eyes flickered unconsciously to Acornkit. He was grinning as he wagged his tail towards some of the apprentices. He leapt up at them, trying to catch their tails. Willowkit felt just a little warmer watching him smile.

# Chapter 20

Rook followed Domino, weaving through the tall sunflower stalks.

"Look, I don't know what's making you want to do this, but you don't have to. We can never go back to the farm if you want," Rook said.

"I'm not going to change my mind," Domino sighed. "Don't worry." They finally reached the end of the field. Rook glanced around. The place was quiet. Then Missing tail cat appeared. Rook tensed. Missing tail cat looked ready to fight. His scratches from the fight with Rook were gone and except for the missing tail, he would have been scarless.

"Domino, Rook, I'm glad to see you. Is it about my friends?" Missing tail cat asked in a friendly tone.

"Yes, we've decided we will help you. Unless they're already dead?" Domino said bravely. Rook was slightly surprised at his tone.

"They are not. Thank you for your help," said Missing tail cat. "I knew you would come. I'm glad you healed well Rook. I knew you would. Your humans brought you to the vet, didn't they?"

"Where did you go? To the vet as well?" asked Rook.

"I heal quick," shrugged Missing tail cat. "Did you really think I would be so easy to fight? Ha. I let you win. If I'd battered you there would be no more chance of you helping me." Domino raised his eyebrow. Rook was dumbfounded, lost for words. He didn't know what to say.

"Y-you let me win?" spluttered Rook.

"Of course. You're still a kitten. How strong . did you think you were?" laughed Missing tail cat. Rook didn't know what to believe. Of course, what missing tail cat said was true. Rook was only three months old and much smaller. Rook glanced at Domino who shrugged.

"Alright, so we will help you, in exchange for information. About the Clans. Where Rook came from," continued Domino.

"Yes, I said that, didn't I?" nodded Missing tail cat.

"What's your name?" Rook asked.

"Ah, finally," laughed Missing tail cat.

"What is it, you've never told us," Rook pushed. He was slightly sour that Missing tail cat had pretended to lose the fight.

"Yeah, we just called you Missing tail cat," agreed Domino. Missing tail cat laughed once more.

"I'm Charles," he said poshly, dipping his head slightly. Rook and Domino stared. "Ha. I'm just kidding. Imagine. Charles, what a funny name." Rook grimaced.

"So what's your real name?" frowned Domino.

"I'm Hades," the cat said, his eyes fixed on the two young cats. "

"Hades... Saffanah talked about that once. She learnt about it in school. Isn't it like the God of fire or something?" frowned Rook.

"God of the dead and king of the underworld," replied Hades, showing his teeth. "Loove it."

"Oki...., so did like your humans name you? Or your parents?" asked Domino.

"Humans?" huffed Hades. "I have no humans. I named myself. Before that, my parents named me of course. I'm not telling you what I was called before. All you have to know is the me now." Hades narrowed his eyes. "Right, let's get to the farm." Hades marched towards the farm, Domino and Rook in tow.

"You still think this is a good idea? This guy's named after the God of Death!" Rook muttered underneath his breath. "And I didn't even beat him. He was pretending."

"Maybe he's just saying he was pretending," Domino put in although they both knew that was not true.

"Domino..," Rook sighed.

"Look, I really do think it's a good idea," Domino said. "You don't need to do this. We can turn back. I'll do it. I'll do it for you."

"It's fine. If you're sure. I'll do it," Rook said firmly. He pushed all his insecurities away. Hades turned his head.

"Stop it with the hushed talking. Get moving," he ordered. Rook rolled his eyes.

"Stop ordering us about. We can just turn around," Rook muttered.

"Then by all means, do," Hades snapped.

"You realised you're the one who needs help, right?" Rook raised an eyebrow.

"Yes but not from a complaining annoying cat. I thought you'd be alright. Domino and I would be just fine, if you want to go," Hades retorted. Rook glanced at Domino who shook his head.

"I never said I wanted to go," huffed Rook. "What's your plan, anyways?"

"Plan? Haven't made one up yet," shrugged Hades.

"Well, we better make one!" exclaimed Rook.

"We'll do it when we get there," shrugged Hades, not looking too concerned.

"On our way there why don't you tell us about the Clans?" suggested Domino.

"Sure whatever," shrugged Hades. "There are four Clans. ThunderClan, ShadowClan, RiverClan and WindClan. ThunderClan are the brave ones. ShadowClan are the stealthy ones. RiverClan is known for swimming and WindClan are known for their swiftness."

"Clans of cats?" Rook asked. Hades rolled his eyes.

"Yes, of course," he said obviously.

"Do they get along?" asked Domino.

"Will you let me finish?" snapped back Hades. "They each have their bit of territory. Their bit of forest. There are borders and they mark it. Sometimes, they will fight if another Clan cat crosses it. Each Clan is loyal to their own Clan. No helping cats from another Clan."

"Woah...," Rook muttered. He thought about WindClan. He imagined his parents, strong cats, fighting ThunderClan, ShadowClan and RiverClan cats.

"There is a hierarchy in the Clan," continued Hades. They had reached the farm. The fence was planted in front of them. They slipped underneath and went silent. Humans were conversing on the front porch. Hades led them behind the farmhouse and towards the stable and barn. Rook and Domino kept low to the ground, going quietly and swiftly. The didn't take the path this time. They trotted on the long unkept grasses. They peered through some weeds to the stable and barn.

"What's our plan?" asked Rook under his breath.

"Yeah. How are we getting in?" nodded Domino. Hades

frowned.

"I'm thinking about it," he huffed.

"Didn't you already think about it?" accused Rook.

"No. I was talking to you about the Clans. You were bombarding me with questions," retorted Hades. "Let's go in. Improvise. "

"No. We're not doing that," Rook said firmly. "We need a plan. A plan that won't get us trapped in that barn. A plan that won't get us killed. We're not going to improvise. We'll sit out here till you, or one of us, comes up with a decent plan." Rook didn't know why he was suddenly being so bossy but he did not want to jump straight into the danger once more. He had done it once. He was not going to make the same mistake again. Domino agreed with Rook. He was glad to have Rook with him.

"Alright," said Hades slowly, narrowing his eyes at Rook. "I'll think of a plan."

# Chapter 21

"Oh, what are you doing here?" Mintspot asked, as if just noticing Willowkit. Willowkit had been curled up in the corner. Mintspot tilted her head. Willowkit shrugged.

"What are you doing? Pouting?" Mintspot raised her eyebrows.

"No," mumbled Willowkit.

"Go out," Mintspot said. Willowkit frowned. Wasn't that what Mintspot wanted? For Willowkit to be quiet. "You've been in here doing whatever you're doing for a quarter moon. Just go out." Willowkit scuttled outside. The fresh air was nice. Acornkit trotted to her.

"Hey," he grinned. "Do you want to play?"

"Not now," sighed Willowkit. She retreated to her usual spot in the bracken bush.

"You promised the other time and you never did," Acornkit frowned.

"I don't feel like playing," mumbled Willowkit.

"Why not?" asked Acornkit.

"Leave me alone," muttered Willowkit. Was it too hard? What did he want with her? He could play with Snailkit, with anybody. Anybody but her. She wasn't important... She wasn't wanted...

"Tell me why you're sad," Acornkit said, sliding beside Willowkit. Willowkit let out a small sigh.

"You don't need to know," mumbled Willowkit. She was slightly confused. Nobody had ever asked her to tell them what was wrong. She didn't know how to react.

"Yeah I do. You're my best friend," Acornkit said firmly. Willowkit went still. Best friend? Her heart started racing.

"Really?" her voice squeaked.

"Yeah, of course," Acornkit said as if it was obvious. Willowkit felt something warm sprout in her heart. Her body trembled slightly.

"Oh ok... you're my best friend too," she mumbled softly. Acornkit smiled.

"So why are you sad?" he asked.

"It's Stormkit," blurted Willowkit. "I didn't know why everybody hated me before. But now I do. Mintspot even told me. It's because everbody... everybody wishes Stormkit was here. Playing and laughing and everything. They wish it was him instead of me. You must to." Acornkit's eyes widened.

"What do you mean?" he squeaked in disbelief. "Of course I don't think that. I haven't even seen Stormkit. I like you. You're my best friend."

"Don't lie," Willowkit sighed sourly.

"I'm not lying. Why would I prefer Stormkit? I don't know him," Acornkit rolled his eyes but then saw Willlowkit really was sad. "Anyways, what do you care about other cats' feelings?"

"That's what everybody thinks," said Willowkit.

"They don't think that," Acornkit said.

"Of course they do," Willowkit said, her body shaking.

"Do you want me to call Troutfur?" asked Acornkit. Willowkit shook her head wildly. No. She didn't want attention. That would be the worst thing that could happen.

"No I want you to leave me alone," she almost snapped. She didn't know what had overcome her. She had always found it easier to talk to Acornkit but she had never been so strong or angry with him. She usually just went with what he said, quietly and happily.

"I'll stay with you," suggested Acornkit. "So you're not sad."

"You can play with Snailkit," said Willowkit.

"I don't want to. He can be annoying sometimes," replied Acornkit.

"Ok," Willowkit relented. They stayed huddled together. Willowkit found herself appreciating her company. She never would have thought that possible. She normally watched others, alone. She liked being hiding with someone else. Acornkit curled up into a ball, pressing next to Willowkit. His warmth spread to her body. She smiled. She closed her eyes and buried her face in her paws. Her body was tingling. With something she only felt sometimes. When her mother paid attention to her. When her father paid attention to her. It was the small happy trickle of love. She would take as much as she got. Maybe this was what it felt to have a brother. Maybe if Stormkit was there, he would be curled up

against her, leaking his love and warmth to her. She wished, for the millionth time in her life, that Stormkit was back. It would mend everything. Maybe. Then they could curl up together, brother and sister. He would comfort her. Like Acornkit. But for now, she would take what she had. She wished Stormkit was there but... Acornkit was also enough. She was his best friend. He was her best friend. She could pretend they were siblings. For now, he was enough. More than enough.

# Chapter 22

"You ready?" asked Rook, watching Domino lick his fur clean. "It's dawn."

"Don't worry," replied Domino then he flicked his tail. "Let's go. Hopefully Hades has a plan." Rook nodded. They slipped out and Rook expected barking to burst the silence but instead, the air was deadly still. Together, the two cats made it to the sunflower field.

"Do you think it's crazy?" asked Domino.

"What?" replied Rook.

"Helping Hades. After he tried to kill us," Domino said.

"I dunno," shrugged Rook. "I hope you don't get us killed."

"Yeah," Domino nodded, shivering slightly. "I hope so too." Suddenly, Hades appeared. His eyes set on Rook.

"Are you ready?" he asked them. Domino nodded.

"What's your plan?" asked Rook. They made their way through the dark sunflowers.

"We wait till there aren't any humans and sneak in. Break my friends out. Done," Hades announced. Rook almost stopped in his tracks.

"That's your great plan?" he exclaimed in disbelief. "You had a whole day to think about it."

"Yeah that is my great plan," nodded Hades, ignoring the sarcasm. "Can you come up with better?"

"You're supposed to be coming up with one!" shot back Rook. "We're not being forced to help you." Hades narrowed his eyes.

"You're a coward," Hades stated.

"What?" snapped Rook, flicking his tail angrily. Who was this cat to say that? Hades was asking *them* for help, not the other way around. He could at least show some gratefulness.

"When things seem slightly harder or a bit dangerous, you don't want to do it," Hades said, meeting Rook's eye.

"That's not true," spat Rook. "I was the one who wanted to go to the farm in the first place. I was the one who fought you."

"Then go along with my plan. You think it's ok, don't you

Domino?" Hades said, raising his eyes at Domino. Domino glanced from Rook to Hades then shrugged.

"I guess," he mumbled.

"Great, let's do it then," Hades said.

"I'm no coward and I don't need to prove it to you. We will help you but I'm doing this for Domino. Just know that if it comes to it, I will not stop to save your life or if I have to, I will sacrifice you over myself or Domino," Rook said calmly, taking a deep breath. Hades scoffed.

"Let's go," he said. They set off to the farm.

# Chapter 23

Willowkit sniffed. It was dark outside. She could hear the owls outside. They seemed so distant. Everybody in the nursery was asleep. Willowkit was curled up in her own corner, her mother in another. Snailkit and Acornkit were comfortably nestled against their mother.  Willowkit shivered, not because of the cold. Slowly, she got up and padded out of the nursery. She didn't know where she was going. All she knew was that she just wanted to get out of there. The camp was weirdly silent. Every cat was in their nests, sleeping peacefully, their stomachs full. Willowkit's stomach gave an angry grumble. She hadn't eaten since the day before. It wasn't like Mintspot checked up on her. Willowkit wandered to the fresh-kill pile. There, she found a half buried raven. It was scrawny and dead long ago..., but it was food. She dragged it out of the small hole in the ground and started to chew. She spat out the feathers and gnawed on the bare bones. Feeling much livelier, Willowkit trotted past the warrior's den. She didn't turn back to the nursery. She headed for the camp entrance. She didn't care that she wasn't allowed out. She didn't even think about how much trouble she might get into. It's not like anybody cared. They wouldn't mind if she got eaten by a fox, she told herself. With that, she slipped out of camp. She found herself in a whole new world. Large trees loomed in front of her. She crossed a patch of long grasses and entered the dark forest. Crickets chirped, owls howled and shadows danced. Unbothered, Willowkit kept trotting away from camp. She felt the fresh dirt under her paws. She felt the tingle of excitement running down her back. Everything here was new. New smells, new sights. It was great! She could smell food everywhere although she couldn't see any. Finally, she heard some rustling. She accelerated towards the noise. It was the fast trickle of water. She pushed past a few bushes and through some tall grasses. She found herself at the bank of a river. The water was dark and rushed down angrily. Willowkit tilted her head. She stared at it for a while. Then suddenly, she felt teeth on her scruff. She was lifted off the ground. She let out a small cry as a cold wind hit her face.

"I found her!" came a muffled voice. Willowkit frowned.

She knew that voice. She knew the voice of all the cats in her Clan. And their smells too.

"Lizardpelt?" Willowkit said.

"Yeah kit," Lizardpelt replied, setting Willowkit down. "You should not have been wandering out of camp at night." There were a few thuds then out of the tall grasses appeared Gorsestar and Halestorm. A moment later, Doestripe appeared at their sides.

"Thank StarClan," sighed Doestripe.

"What in StarClan were you doing out here?" exclaimed Gorsestar. "We're getting back to camp and you're going to explain, then apologise and then we'll find a fitting punishment for you. You know that you're not allowed out of camp. Not until you become an apprentice."

"Sorry," mumbled Willowkit looking down at her paws. She could feel all the warriors' eyes on her. She had never had so many cats pay attention to her. Her fur rose on her back. She wanted to retreat and hide.

"Let's go," Gorsestar said, flicking his tail. Willowkit trotted after Gorsestar, trying to keep up. They entered camp where Wrencry was waiting. Willowkit peered past Wrencry to where Snailkit and Acornkit were peering at her from the nursery.

"Oh you're alright!" exclaimed Wrencry happily. I didn't know how to respond. She seemed happy. I didn't want to ruin it.

"Right, thanks everybody," Gorsestar said, motioning to the warriors. "Go get some rest. I know you're all on the dawn patrol tomorrow." Lizardpelt and Halestorm nodded briefly and retreated to the warrior den.

"What were you thinking?" sighed Doestripe.

"Yes, I woke up and you weren't there anymore! I got such a fright! I thought something terrible had happened to you or something," interrupted Wrencry. Willowkit shuffled on her feet. She didn't know how to respond. She could feel their disappointment in the air all around her. She hated it. She hated it so much. She already knew that she was a disappointment but to see the leader and deputy look down at her like that... She shook herself. What did she expect? A celebration? No. She deserved this. She had broken a rule.

"Why did you leave?" asked Gorsestar, more gently.

"I-I don't know... I'm sorry. I- I couldn't sleep... So I um... I took some food from the fresh kill pile...," Willowkit trailed off,

unsure whether to keep speaking. She glanced up, to check if they were still listening, if they even cared, if she was boring them. Gorestar, Doestripe and Wrencry were still watching her, listening. She didn't know whether to continue. They were listening to her! She didn't want it to stop. They were actually paying attention to what she was saying! But what if she talked too much? And she bored them? Her mind whirled.

"Yes?" pushed Doestripe gently.

"I er!" Willowkit's head shot up. They wanted her to keep talking!? She wanted to jump with joy. "Um... And I couldn't sleep so I just... decided to take a walk. I'm really sorry. I didn't realise the trees were that big though!" Seeing that the adults were still listening to her, she kept talking, encouraged. She wanted it to last forever. "And there were so many smells! It was like there was prey everywhere! And I saw the river! it's so so big and there's so much water. The water's really loud and dark though... Is it supposed to be like that? I imagine more of a-"

"Willowkit," interrupted Gorsestar. "That's enough. Thank you." Willowkit shut her mouth quickly. She cured herself angrily. She had ruined it. She had talked too much. They didn't want to listen to her. Of course they didn't. How could she ever think that they wanted to listen to her? She whimpered slightly.

"Where's Mintspot?" asked Gorsestar. "She should know about this."

"She's resting," said Wrencry.

"She should have felt Willowkit leave," Doestripe pointed out. "How is she still asleep."

"They weren't um... sleeping side by side," Wrencry said slowly, chosing her words carefully. Gorsestar frowned, giving her a questioning look.

"What do you mean?" asked Doestripe.

"I mean... you know.., they um sleep in different um... corners... of the- er... the nursery," Wrencry said, trying to put her words into a less hurtful way. Doestripe's brow furrowed and Gorsestar flicked his tail, thinking hard.

"Right... ok... Well. We will tell her tomorrow then," Gorsestar said finally. He turned to Willowkit. "You're not to do that again. Understood? It's extremely dangerous. Do you know what kind of predators are out there?" Willowkit gave a small nod.

"Yeah. Foxes, dogs, other cats, badgers, Monsters,

owls...," listed Doestripe. "But you know that already. And you know you broke a rule."

"Yes, one of the strictest rules," added Gorsestar.

"I'm sorry," mumbled Willowkit, too soft for anybody to hear. She meant it. She would stay in the nursery till she died if that's what everybody wanted of her. She'd do anything for anybody, just for them to like her a little more. For them to despise her a little less.

"You are not to go out again, understood?" Gorsestar said in a strict tone. Willowkit nodded. She meant it.

"Yes," she whispered, but nobody heard it. "I promise."

"Good," nodded Gorsestar. "Go back to the nursery. Rest well, ok?" He nodded to Wrencry.

"Goodnight," said Doestripe. Willowkit mumbled a good night back and Wrencry led her back to the nursery.

"I was so scared for you," sighed Wrencry. "You know you should not have done that."

"I know, I'm sorry," replied Willowkit shamefully and softly. Her brain couldn't wrap around the thing Wrencry had said. "I was so scared for you". What did that mean? Willowkit couldn't help but feel a slight flutter at the thought of Wrencry, scared for her safety. They entered the nursery and Snailkit and Acornkit immediately bombarded her with questions.

"Why did you leave?" asked Snailkit, a small smirk on his face.

"What was it like?!" cried Acornkit excitedly.

"Did Gorsestar yell at you?" Snailkit demanded, his voice full of excitement and his eyes wide.

"Did you see foxes?" Acornkit exclaimed, his eyes widening.

"Did you see Twolegs? Did you *hear* Twolegs? Were you attacked?" asked Snailkit quickly.

"Are you ok? Why did you leave without me? I would have wanted to come. Now you've got to tell me *everything*," exclaimed Acornkit. Wrencry nudged her kits away from Willowkit lovingly.

"Now now. It's time for you all to go back to sleep. Willowkit was not supposed to go out of camp. She will have a punishment for breaking that rule tomorrow. You two are not to do it? And now Willowkit is tired. She's had a long... walk. Let her get

some rest," Wrencry said, hushing her kits. Willowkit retreated to her spot while Snailkit and Acornkit pressed themselves against Wrencry, bombarding her with questions instead. Willowkit glanced to the other dark corner. Her mother laid there, unmoving. But Snailkit caught her eye. Mintspot looked at her for a moment, her eyes dark. Willowkit's heart started. Was Mintspot going to invite her to sleep beside her? Her eyes brightened. Mintspot turned away.

# Chapter 24

Rook peered through the window and flicked his tail. Hades and Domino appeared at his side.

"Right, Domino, stay out here and signal to us if somebody comes near," Rook said.

"Ok," nodded Domino. He took a deep breath and sat down, his eyes sharp and ears pointed. Rook and Hades leapt down the small ledge and edged towards the barn entrance.

"There's a gap," Hades said, nodding towards a small hole in the wood. Rook frowned.

"Let's get this over with," Rook said. He approached the gap. He crouched down and slipped under. He felt the wood dig into his back but managed to scramble into the barn. Hades was right behind him. The barn was dark with boxes and cages piled on top of each other. At the end of the barn, Rook noticed something strange. There was a large metallic pen filled with straw. Beside that, hung above a table, were sharp pointed knives. Rook sniffed and felt shivers run down his spine. He froze. The overwhelming smell of blood and death filled him.

"You ok?" Hades whispered. Rook shook himself and took a deep breath. He managed a small nod.

"Where are they?" asked Rook.

"Arian? Bear? Stripe? Alani?" Hades said, raising his voice. There was some shuffling. A few snorts from unknown animals. Rook was ready to run. To leave. After a long pause, Rook started to back away. Hades sighed, ready to follow Rook.

"H-Hades?" came a high-pitched voice.

"Alani!" exclaimed Hades, his eyes pricking.

"Shhh," shushed a cat. Hades followed the voice, Rook was behind him. They padded quietly and carefully. Rook glanced up at the window, to see if Domino was still there. He was. Hades leapt up on a box and navigated past a few empty cages and packed boxes. Rook was behind him.

"We're here," the voices of cats guided them. Rook and Hades stopped in front of a large cage. Inside were huddled four cats. Rook remembered them. Alani, the pale yellow cat was the

only one standing. Her face was pressed against the cold bars, her eyes wide with terror. They didn't seem so intimidating, cowering in a cage anymore.

"Hades!" exclaimed Alani happily. Behind her was the dark tabby cat. He smiled a little. The two other cats were curled up in balls, their faces hidden in the dark.

"You came!" said the tabby cat.

"Of course," nodded Hades, approaching the cage.

"And you brought... *him*," added Alani, tilting her head.

"I'm helping him break you out," Rook told them. "So be grateful." He hoped they wouldn't attack him once they got out, although they didn't seem fit enough for that.

"Are you guys ok?" asked Hades. "Arian? Bear?"

"Arian's ok," said Alani.

"Arian, it's Hades," the tabby said, nudging the the silver cat with the missing eye. She sat up. She smiled when she saw Hades.

"Bear, we're getting out!" cried Arian. Bear, the black cat, remained curled up although his eyes drifted to Hades and Rook.

"We're not getting out," he snorted. "How are you going to open the cage?" Hades shrugged.

"We will get you out. I don't care how," he said.

"Chop chop then," Alani said excitedly.

"Come on," Hades said, motioning to Rook then at the cage door.

"You haven't introduced me," Rook pointed out, keeping his distance to the cage.

"Right well, this is Alani," Hades said, nodding to the pale yellow she-cat. "That's Stripe, as you know. Bear and Arian."

"Nice to meet you Rook," Arian, Alani and Stripe cooed.

"Hmmmm," Rook said, nodding uncertainly. "Like how happy you were when Domino and I came into your barn?"

"That was a misunderstanding," Alani pointed out.

"Yeah. Can we get on with it?" pushed Arian. Hades nodded. Together, Rook and Hades tried to pry open the lock. Rook dug his nails into the small hole in the padlock. After ten minutes of frustration, the lock finally snapped free. The four trapped cats filed out. Rook was surprised. He hadn't expected for their plan to work. Now they just had to get out without anybody catching them.

"Let's go," Hades said, after they had all greeted each

other happily. They leaped down towards the barn door. There were wails and cries of protest from the other cages. Rook ignored them. He wasn't staying in the barn longer than he had to. The six cats slipped out of the barn without any problem. They met up with Domino.

"You made it!" cried Domino. Then his eyes landed on the four cats that had almost killed him and Rook. His face fell slightly. Rook didn't know what he had been expecting. Domino looked as if he was suddenly reminded that the four cats he had helped save had tried to kill him. He looked like he was regretting his choices.

"Sorry, about the other day," Alani piped in.

"Yeah... um no problem," replied Domino awkwardly. Rook sniggered. They fled back towards civilisation. When they reached the sunflower field, Hades thanked Rook then Domino.

"Thanks a lot," smiled Alani, running her tail down Rook's spine. He felt shivers of pleasure run down his spine. He smiled a little.

"No problem," he winked.

"Ugh, stop flirting," Bear rolled his eyes grumpily.

"we're not flirting!" exclaimed Rook, distressed.

"Ha," laughed Hades. "Thank you."

"remember your promise," Rook reminded him. "I want to know more about the Clans."

"You have my word. I'll meet you here tomorrow right after dawn, sound good?" Hades said.

"Yeah. Great. Thanks," smiled Rook.

"Thank you both," Stripe said. "Again."

"Yeah, let's go. I don't want to spend more time with these retards," muttered Bear under his breath. Hades rolled his eyes but didn't say anything.

"Let's go," Domino said quickly. Rook nodded. Once the two friends had reached the road and made their way towards Rook's house, Domino started blabbing nervously.

"At some point I spotted humans but they just passed the barn. I'm telling you, I almost died of fear. Ugh... and then when I saw those cats, something in my mind just clicked. I mean, I was so stupid to ever want to save them. They almost killed us!" exclaimed Domino. Rook laughed.

"It seems to me like you've got a good heart. Although you really are scared quickly, " Rook said.

"Well. I hope I never see them again," sighed Domino.

"I will. Tomorrow," Rook reminded him. Domino cringed.

"Oh yeah," he murmured. "You don't mind if I don't join you?"

"I guess. But why the sudden change of mind?" asked Rook.

"I just- I don't know... sitting there, I realised I really don't want to die. I know I complain about my family... but that's what makes it home. I like it where I live. I want to live there forever.Or at least, a bit longer," Domino shrugged.

"Right," nodded Rook. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah," nodded Domino. "After your meeting with Hades."

"Sure," smiled Rook. "You know he's going to ask why you're avoiding him."

"Once you're done talking about the Clans with him, they'll be out of our lives," Domino pointed out feeling relieved.

"Hmmm," Rook said, feeling unsure about that.

# Chapter 25

Willowkit listened, her head low, as the deputy and Clan leader talked to her mother.

"She snuck out?" Mintspot repeated. Her face was set between anger and annoyance.

"Yes. We talked to her about it though, and she won't do it again," nodded Doestripe.

"She wasn't supposed to sneak out in the first place. Is this what I taught you?" Mintspot snapped at Willowkit, turning away from Doestripe and Gorsestar.

"No. I'm sorry," whispered Willowkit.

"What are you saying? I can't hear you. Can you talk?" Mintspot accused, raising her voice.

"Sorry," blurted Willowkit, still softly.

"Argh," Mintspot cried out, lashing her tail out in frustration.

"Mintspot. I'm sure Willowkit understands what she did was wrong," Gorsestar said gently.

"Mmmmm," Mintspot said, closing her eyes. She took a moment to calm down. "You're grounded. You're to stay in the nursery for a moon." Gorsestar frowned. Willowkit hung her head, telling herself that was what she deserved. She had broken a rule. She had to be punished.

"Well, Mintspot, we were hoping to come up with a suitable punishment together," Gorsestar put in. "Staying in for a moon is quite.... harsh really." Mintspot took a moment then nodded.

"What do you suggest?" she asked, her words controlled. Willowkit cowered.

"Well, as Willowkit left camp and has seen part of our territory, how about, we apprentice her later?" suggested Gorsestar. Doestripe nodded but Mintspot didn't agree.

"I'm not letting her become an apprentice later than everyone!" Mintspot spat. "I don't want to have to stay in the nursery longer than I must."

"Nobody's keeping you in the nursery," pointed out

Doestripe, which was a mistake. Mintspot thought for a moment then nodded.

"Alright Gorsestar, I agree with you," nodded Mintspot. "That is a great punishment."

"Good. So Willowkit, as you have left camp without permission, you will now be apprenticed half a moon later than you would normally have been," Gorsestar explained. Willowkit nodded. She never objected.

"Good then that's settled," Mintspot said finally. She turned around and limped towards the fresh-kill pile. Willowkit trotted back to the nursery, her head down.

"Tell me all about it!" cried a happy voice. Willowkit jumped. Acornkit smiled at her expectantly. Snailkit was right behind him. Willowkit sighed and continued walking towards the nursery.

"Come on. Tell us all about it!" pushed Snailkit, trotting by her side.

"Are you ok? Did you see a fox or something?" asked Acornkit. Willowkit shook her head.

"Can you leave me alone?" she asked.

"Fine," huffed Snailkit, marching away.

"Do you want to play?" asked Acornkit.

"No," replied Willowkit flatly. She did want to play. She wanted to have fun. To smile. To laugh. But she knew that wasn't going to happen. Mintspot would be even more upset. What would they think of her? That even after her punishment and the disappearance of her brother, she is still going to play and have fun? No. She shouldn't be happy.

"What do you want to do?" asked Acornkit instead.

"Be alone," answered Willowkit. She didn't want to be mean to Acornkit. She just wanted to be alone. And the sooner Acornkit got made at her and left her alone, the better. She didn't deserve friends and Acornkit shouldn't have to hang out with her.

"Why?" asked Acornkit.

"Cos I want to," Willowkit said. "So please, just go."

"I'm sorry you got in trouble. But don't you want to play?" asked Acornkit.

"No. I don't," answered Willowkit.

"Why not? You're not normal, you know. All kits like to play," Acornkit sighed. "What's wrong with you?"

# Chapter 26

"Isn't it great that Dad doesn't have soooo much work anymore?" smiled Saffanah. She was petting Rook, sitting on her bed with a colouring book and pencils at her side.

"Yeah. He didn't go to work for a whole full day yesterday!" exclaimed Rook in reply. Saffanah smiled and scratched Rook behind the ear.

"I think Dad's getting promoted," continued Saffanah. "It's going to be great. We might even get a bigger garden. And a dog!" A dog? Rook snorted. Why would Saffanah want a dog? Cats were much better.

"Of course, you're always going to be my best friend. But maybe the dog can be all of our friends?" Saffanah said. Rook shrugged.

"I mean..., as long as you love me more than the dog," he said.

"I'd name the dog Diamond if she was a girl and Simon if she was a boy," Saffanah said.

"Why Simon?" Rook said.

"Saffanah!" called Diana from downstairs. Saffanah looked up.

"Yeah?" she answered.

"Lucy is coming in ten minutes to pick you up. Get ready!" Diana replied.

"Ok!" said Saffanah. She leapt off her bed, making Rook jump slightly. He watched curled up on her bed as Saffanah pulled out a t-shirt and some shorts from her cupboard. Then she grabbed a bag she had packed in the morning.

"I'm going to Lucy's house but I'm going to be back before dinner," Saffanah explained to Rook.

"Have fun," said Rook. Saffanah jogged downstairs. With a sigh and a stretch, Rook leapt off the bed and trotted down the stairs. In the kitchen, Diana was giving Saffanah some strawberries for tea. Rook padded past the kitchen and slipped out of the house. He trotted down a few streets towards Domino's house. He was going to tell Domino everything Hades had told him that morning.

The two best friends sat together in the attic.

"So?" asked Domino.

"He told me so much!" Rook said.

"Well spill then," smiled Domino, his tail twitching in anticipation.

"Apparently the Clans were created like long ago. They rule everything in that forest! There are four Clans, as you know. RiverClan, WindClan, ShadowClan and ThunderClan. ShadowClan sounds quite violent and dark, don't you think?" Rook said.

"All the Clans sound dark," was Domino's response.

"Yeah well... Anyways, each Clan has their bit of territory. ShadowClan has like the territory with pine trees or something so it's really dark and shadowy. They are known for being really sneaky. ThunderClan are known to be brave and loyal. Apparently they like to take in loners and *pets*."

"Pets? As in cat pets. As in us?"

"Well yeah. Except they call them kittypets," shrugged Rook.

"What are loners exactly? Lonely cats?" asked Domino.

"No. They're just cats without a home I guess, just wandering about. So yeah. May I continue or would you like to add more?"

"No no. Go on."

"Thank you," Rook said then continued, "WindClan are known to be fast. Apparently they're really skinny. They live off mostly rabbits. They live like in a huge field you know, so that's where most rabbits are. Then there is RiverClan. RiverClan are known for-"

"Swimming," finished Domino. Rook gave Domino a pointed look but nodded.

"Yeah, swimming. No need to interrupt," sighed Rook. "Anyways, each Clan protects their own. They even have a hierarchy."

"Oh yeah? Like best killer, second best killer, third best killer?" mocked Domino. He didn't like the way Rook seemed so obsessed. The way Rook's eyes gleamed when he talked about the Clans. He didn't like that Rook was interested in some violent vicious cats far far away.

"You know that all this is probably made up, right?" Domino said.

"Of course it isn't!" exclaimed Rook.

"How do you know it's real?" asked Domino.

"I-I... I just do...," Rook said, frowning at the ground. "I think I come from there."

"Y-you?" laughed Domino then turned serious. "Really?"

"Yeah really. Is that so crazy to think? I mean, I don't know my real family. I know that I wasn't born in Saffanah's house! I must have come from somewhere. I must have parents. Siblings perhaps."

"How do you know they're not dead? How do you know they're no happily living with another family. You know that kittens are passed around a lot. From family to family. That's what happened to you. You were probably born in some nice warm pet store and your weird neighbour bought you then didn't want you and dumped you at Saffanah's."

"I know that's not possible. I remember something from when I was born... a- a..." Rook trailed off. He couldn't find the right word.

"What are you planning on doing with your newfound information anyways?" asked Domino, looking at Rook worriedly. Rook thought for a moment then sighed. He shrugged.

"Nothing. Nothing really. Don't worry. I mean, it's just some background information. I don't have to follow up on it. Plus-plus my life is here," Rook said decisively. Domino smiled in relief.

"Thank you;" he said.

"But maybe I could visit the Clans," Rook added as an afterthought.

"What!?" cried Domino.

"Yeah yeah yeah..," nodded Rook absentmindedly. "I need to talk to Hades."

"No. I think you need to go back and see your nice perfect house and your perfect owners and you need to realise that your life is great just as it is. No need to go hunting for some wild Clan cats," Domino said, trying to put sense into Rook.

"No Domino. I feel a pull to the Clans. It must be for some reason," Rook said.

"No. You're just being your curious self. You don't need to visit the Clans. I'm like more than ninety percent sure that you weren't born there. I mean, no offence, but look at you. You're-you're not very muscly. You're not very good at hunting. You're not

very good at fighting. You're not very- very Clanlike."

"How would you know what Clanlike is?" retorted Rook.

"Look," sighed Domino. "All I'm saying is..., your obsession with the Clans is just... well you're *obsessed*."

"Not obsessed. Just interested," Rook corrected.

"So you're going to visit the Clans? Ask around if somebody lost their little kit at birth?" Domino said. Rook thought for a moment. It was ridiculous, just as Domino was saying. He sighed.

"You're right. That's- that's stupid. I mean.., I'm happy here. And I certainly do not come from a Clan..."

"Thank you, finally," Domino sighed.

# Chapter 27

Willowkit dreamt that night. She had never had a dream like that. She never had dreams.

*She is standing in the middle of a large field of tall, swaying grass. There are pretty flowers dotted everywhere. In the dark night sky, stars are shimmering. The moon casts a calm, soothing light onto her. She looks around. Where is everybody? She isn't in camp. She shouldn't be out of camp.* Don't worry, *a voice echoes around her. The voice is soothing and gentle. King and loving. Willowkit glances up. She looked around. She sniffs. She cannot see or smell anybody else.* You're not going to get in trouble*, the voice continues. Willowkit believes it.* Here, you can smile. Here you can relax. You can let the barriers down. You can smile. You can run. You can be yourself. *Willowkit didn't know how to react. Be herself? How was she going to do that? Willowkit pricked her ears. She heard the sound of the trickle of water. She trotted towards it, pushing through the tall grasses. Maybe she would find RiverClan if she followed the river. Finally, she burst out of the grasses. In front of her ran a beautiful river. Willowkit crouched by the bank, staring into the dark depths of the water. She saw herself reflected back. Her small ears. Her messy fur. Her eyes, filled with sadness, filled with pain. Pain she didn't understand. Sadness she didn't understand. She sighed.* Where am I? *She cried out. There was a long pause. Willowkit glanced around, waiting for the familiar voice.* You're ok. *Willowkit frowned. That wasn't the answer she was hoping for... But somehow, it calmed her. Willowkit took a deep breath and sat down. She sat down by the river and listened to the calming water. She let herself enjoy the feeling of being alone. Not lonely. Just alone. She cleared her mind of all the stressing thoughts. Of all the things she pretended to be. All the things she did and didn't do to please others. Just for a while, she could enjoy herself. Just for a moment, she could be a bit happy. That was enough for her. More than enough.*

*It was much much more peace and joy than she had felt since she was born.*

# Chapter 28

"Can you teach how to hunt?" asked Rook.

"No," replied Hades flatly.

"Why not?" asked Rook, disappointed. They were sat under the shade of the tall sunflowers. The sun was high up in the sky and it was way past dawn.

"I don't want to," shrugged Hades. "I've got better things to do." Rook frowned.

"No offence," added Hades as an afterthought. "We've been *chatting* too long. I've got to go."

"Where?" asked Rook curiously.

"Somewhere. None of your business," said Hades.

"Where?" asked Rook again.

"Somewhere," huffed Hades.

"Please teach me how to hunt," begged Rook.

"Not now," huffed Hades.

"When?" grinned Rook, his ears perking up.

"Never," grumbled Hades.

"Why are you so grumpy?" sighed Rook.

"I don't want to be here," replied Hades truthfully.

"We helped your friends," reminded Rook.

"I know. That's why I'm here," replied Hades gruffly. "Right, I'm going now. Don't want to listen to your annoying voice any longer."

"I'm not annoying!" exclaimed Rook.

"Hmph," snorted Hades, getting up and flicking his tail.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," smiled Rook happily.

"Nope," Hades replied. Rook frowned.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I'm done," he said. "Right bye."

"W-b- but," Rook furrowed his brow. "But you're supposed to tell me about the Clans."

"I've told you everything I know already," answered Hades. "I'm going now. See you never. It was ok meeting you."

"You're leaving? Forever?" frowned Rook. "But why? Where are you going? Can't you teach me to hunt? Or fight?" Hades

looked at him blankly.

"Sorry kit," he said finally with a small sigh. "I'll miss you. But my friends and I, we're leaving. We're going to find a new home. A better home. Somewhere where humans won't just snatch us from our home."

"But why can't you stay here?" asked Rook. "You're safe. "

"Do you even know where I live?" huffed Hades.

"No..," trailed off Rook.

"That's right. Because I don't live anywhere. We don't have a home anymore," Hades explained gruffly. "Now I've really got to go. Bye." Hades swivelled around and trotted off. Rook watched, a frown on his face.

"Bye," he called back. "I'll miss you." Hades didn't turn back.

# Chapter 29

"You miss your brother, don't you?" said Acornkit. Willowkit frowned. They were sitting outside of the nursery. Willowkit was invisible, nobody except Acornkit was paying attention to her. Acornkit was sulking because his brother had won a fight and had apparently cheated.

"Yeah, sort of," shrugged Willowkit. The thing is, she didn't remember him. She missed the thought of a brother. She missed the possibility of a better life, with a sibling. A life where Mintspot wasn't crippled. Where Beetlejaw would teach her to hunt and fight. Where Stormkit would play with her. A life where she she had a happy family. A Clan that *saw* her and *heard* her. She missed a life of happiness. Joy. Hope.

"Maybe he's not dead," Acornkit said, trying to cheer Willowkit up.

"Huh?" frowned Willowkit.

"Maybe he's a live somewhere. Maybe he's like I dunno, a kittypet," piped in Acornkit.

"Maybe," shrugged Willowkit. "Probably not."

"Why not?" asked Acornkit. "We can find him."

"Ha. How?" said Willowkit. "We can't do that. Mintspot has been searching for literally moons and she hasn't found him. If she hasn't then we won't. He's gone. Stormkit's gone..." And with him all hope of a happy, normal life.

"Do you wanna play?" asked Acornkit finally.

"No," replied Willowkit.

"come on. I don't want to play with Snailkit," Acornkit said.

"I don' want to play," replied Willowkit.

"Why not?" sighed Acornkit. He liked Willowkit. He wanted her to be his friend. He wanted to cheer her up. But she just never seemed to want to play. Sometimes they'd play but somehow Mintspot would ruin it or Willowkit would suddenly turn sullen, like she had committed a crime. He wished she'd be more.... energetic and happy. She seemed to be sad all the time. He didn't understand why she was sad about her brother. She couldn't even

remember him. Plus, she had him. They could be friends. They could be best friends.

"Let's play!" pushed Acornkit. "Come on! It'll be fun."

"I don't want to," said Willowkit although deep down, she did. She really wanted to play. She ached to have fun. She wanted to be Acornkit's best friend. She just wanted to roll about in the dirt with him. Have fun. Laugh. But she held herself back. She was disrespecting her dead/ maybe not dead brother. Mintspot wouldn't agree and Beetlejaw..., it's not like he would disagree with Mintspot.

"Acornkit!" yelled Snailkit from across the clearing. Willowkit ignored him but Acornkit lifted his head.

"What?" he snapped back, slightly angry, although his urge to play and have fun almost forced him to forget about the disagreement with his brother.

"Let's play. Don't sulk," Snailkit said, his eyes bright. Acornkit didn't move for a moment, to leave Snailkit waiting. But Willowkit already knew Acornkit was going to go play. A few moments later, Acornkit bounded towards Snailkit and they tumbled on a pile to the ground. Willowkit sniffed and turned away.

# Chapter 30

"He's gone," Rook said.

"Really?" said Domino.

"Yep, he left. He didn't even teach me how to hunt," sighed Rook. Domino sighed with relief.

"He probably can't even hunt," said Domino.

"Of course he can!" exclaimed Rook. "If he can almost kill us, I'm pretty sure that he can hunt. Plus, how do you think they survived?"

"Don't even remind me about that. I'm glad they're gone. Everything can go back to how it was," smiled Domino.

"Yeah, I guess," shrugged Rook. He didn't want everything to go back to normal normal. It was always the same. He would miss Hades, although he would never say that aloud.

"Well everything can go back to normal then," smiled Domino. "Let's celebrate."

"This isn't a time to celebrate!" exclaimed Rook.

"Why not?" sighed Domino. "Come on, how 'bout we look around the neighbourhood. Maybe Poppy will talk to us." Rook made a face.

"She's only going to make fun of us- no you," sighed Rook. Domino frowned. Poppy was one of the prettiest cats in the neighbourhood. She was a beautifully groomed turkish van calico cat.

"She hasn't gotten to know me yet," said Domino. Rook shrugged.

"If you say so," he said.

Rook and Domino trotted along a white fence then leapt over into the garden below. Rook sniffed. He smelt cat all over the garden. A strong scent.

"A cat lives here," said Rook.

"Yeah, this is Ben's house," said Domino. Domino knew Ben quite well as before he had met Rook, they had been best friends. Rook had never met Ben.

"Oh, is he here?" Rook said, curious. He trotted towards one of the windows and leapt up. He peered inside.

"Let's go," said Domino, motioning with his tail.

"Why? Maybe he's home," said Rook.

"Let's just go, he's not here," Domino said.

"Yeah, I'm right here," said a voice behind them. Rook turned around. On the fence, a small Japanese Bobtail Long Hair cat was perched on the fence. Domino turned around and made a face.

"Oh heyyyy," he said, grimacing.

"What is it Domino?" taunted Ben. "Finally visiting me after what, oh like half a year?"

"Well.... I was busy," said Domino. Rook trotted to Domino's side.

"hey," he grinned. "I'm Rook. I'm so happy to finally meet you. Domino's told me all about you."

"Yeah? Did he tell you about how he just ditched me the moment you guys became friends?" Ben almost growled. Rook didn't know what to say. He glanced at Domino who looked speechless.

"He didn't say it like that. He said that well..., you guys weren't getting along too good..," Rook said, making it up. Domino had never told him that he had ghosted his former best friend.

"Whatever, get off my turf," snapped Ben.

"Right let's go," said Domino, nodding to Rook. Rook shrugged. As they turned to leave, Ben called after them.

"Oh and by the way, Poppy has a mate," added Ben. Domino pricked his ears but pretended not to care. They leapt over the fence and trotted on the sidewalk together.

"So you ditched Ben?" asked Rook.

"Yeah... he wasn't the *best* best friend, you know? He's really bossy if you get to know him and he doesn't let you have any friends besides him," explained Domino, rolled his eyes.

"So where are we going?" asked Rook.

"Dunno. Find some other cats to talk to, I guess," shrugged Domino.

"You're not upset about Poppy, right?" Rook said, raising his eyes.

"No no," lied Domino.

"Let's just see her. In case. Maybe Ben was lying," Rook said.

"Maybe," said Domino, unsure.

# Chapter 31

Willowkit cocked her head. She stared up at the stars. She waited for Mintspot. Where was Mintspot? Acornkit poked his head out.

"Are you coming in?" he asked. "Aren't you tired?"

"No," replied Willowkit. "I'm just waiting... for Mintspot."

"I thought-" Acornkit said but Wrencry interrupted him.

"Acornkit, get back inside," Wrencry said firmly. She then slipped outside to Willowkit's side.

"Come inside, Willowkit," Wrencry said gently. "It's late. You should be asleep by now." Willowkit frowned. Where was Mintspot? She knew Mintspot didn't exactly care for her but she cared for Mintspot.

"It's getting really late. Mintspot....- You know what, I'm going to go get her," decided Wrencry. Willowkit tilted her head as she watched Wrencry trot towards the warrior's den. A few moments later, she came back out with Beetlejaw instead. Wrencry whispered something into his ear then slipped past Willowkit and into the nursery where Snailkit and Acornkit started asking her many questions. Beetlejaw approached Willowkit. Willowkit's eyes lit up with hope. Was he going to tell her a story? Bring her on a walk? Put her to sleep? She couldn't ruin this moment before it started, so she didn't say anything, just stared hopefully.

"Willowkit," started Beetlejaw slowly. Willowkit nodded eagerly. Beetlejaw hesitated then said, "H-how was your day?" Willowkit almost burst with happiness.

"Good, great. I-" Willowkit stopped. Firstly, her day hadn't been good. Secondly, she didn't want to speak too much or Beetlejaw might get bored and just leave. She stopped.

"Yes?" Beetlejaw pushed.

"I had fun," finished Willowkit softly.

"Ok," said Beetlejaw. "About Mintspot... She's missing being a warrior. So, she's going to be staying in the warrior's den... For- for some time."

"Not in the nursery?" Willowkit furrowed her brow. Beetlejaw nodded.

"I know you won't mind, right?" Beetlejaw said. "You're

independent. And it's only to sleep." Willowkit nodded. Her voice seemed trapped in her throat suddenly. Her eyes were watery and blurry. Beetlejaw had tried to make it as easy as he could but she could read between the lines. Mintspot just didn't want to stay with Willowkit anymore.

"Willowkit?" Beetlejaw said, after a long time of silence.

"Y-yeah," said Willowkit, her voice hoarse. Beetlejaw gulped. He wanted to rush to her side and cuddle with her. He wanted to press her close to him. Tell her that everything was alright. He wanted to bring her into the nursery. Reassure her that she wasn't unloved. He would stay with her in the nursery the whole night with her. But that wasn't how their family worked. That wasn't how Mintspot worked. And how about Stormkit? Stormkit was somewhere out there. And he wasn't getting this kind of treatment. He wasn't getting loved. He wasn't getting cuddled. It wasn't fair. So Beetlejaw just stood there, staring at his daughter, his kit. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. Willowkit shrunk under his gaze. He must be thinking about how annoying I am, she thought. She wished that she could do something to make her parents proud.

"Goodnight," Beetlejaw said finally. He approached her, as if he were about to give her an affectionate lick. Instead, he then swivelled around and padded away. He disappeared into the warrior's den. Willowkit rolled up in a ball. She didn't bother going in the nursery. Snailkit and Acornkit would just stare at her. Wrencry would feel that she had to comfort Willowkit. She would just be another pitied burden. So instead, Willowkit curled into a ball and buried her face in her small tail. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths. Her mind raced, bad thoughts played again and again like a movie in her head. It was only hours later that she finally fell asleep.

# Chapter 32

"Guess what?!" yelled Jeremy, bursting into the house. Rook jolted awake. He was asleep on the first step of the stairs. He shook himself and trotted towards the front door. Saffanah, who had been drawing on the dinner table, jumped off the chair and rushed to her father. Diana glanced up from her book on the couch.

"What?" cried Saffanah, rushing into her father's arms.

"Did you get it?" Diana asked excitedly, her eyes sparkling. Jeremy picked Saffanah off the ground and grinned. Rook listened, interested. This seemed like very big news.

"Yes! Yes!" exclaimed Jeremy. "Yes, I got it! I got the promotion!" Diana jumped off the couch and kissed Jeremy. Jeremy then lift Saffanah up in the air and they spun. Saffanah threw her head back and raised her hands. She let out a happy whoop. Rook smiled, his tail held high.

"Oh my gosh! I'm so proud of you. I'm- I knew you'd get it!" Diana smiled and hugged Saffanah and Jeremy.

"I rushed back as soon as I got the news! It's going to be great. I promise you. We're going to have a great house. There will be a big garden. We will even have a nice little driveway and we can decorate it with whatever you guys one. We'll even have a pool!" Jeremy said. Saffanah cheered.

"Yay! A pool! I can swim with Rook now!" cried Saffanah.

"We need to celebrate!" cried Diana.

"Yes, how about we go to our favourite restaurant," suggested Jeremy, winking.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" shouted Saffanah. The family turned around and walked out of the house, hands linked and laughing happily. Rook watched, tilting his head. He was happy to see his family like that. It hurt him slightly that he couldn't go, or that they didn't say goodbye.

"Bye, have fun," Rook called behind them, but, of course, they didn't hear him. Rook padded into the kitchen and started at the hard bits that were his dinner. He sighed. He wanted to try more. He wanted to eat human food. It smelled delicious. He wanted to try something warm, juicy and tasty, like a mouse. He

didn't want to have these hard bits of food anymore. It was time that he ate something good. With a small smile, he trotted out of the house and headed for Domino's house. When he reached, Domino was in the attic, cleaning himself.

"Hey," said Domino as Rook slipped inside.

"Hey, you hungry?" asked Rook. Domino's ears perked up.

"Yes, always," smiled Domino, looking up.

"Then let's find food," said Rook.

"What do you mean?" frowned Domino. "I thought, when you asked me that question, that you already had something in mind. Like the food at your house."

"The food at my house? Please, I hate it," huffed Rook.

"At least it isn't multicoloured," sighed Domino.

"Do you want to find good food with me or not?" asked Rook.

"how and where?" answered Domino.

"Dumpster?" suggested Rook. "Hunting?"

"Since when can we hunt?" exclaimed Domino in exasperation. "And the dumpsters are like the most dangerous places in the world. There are stray dogs and cat gangs. Not the dumpsters."

"Then can we raid your kitchen?" asked Rook. Domino sighed.

"Sure, but only if you managed to pry open the fridge or the snack cupboard," Domino said. "I've been trying for months."

"Let's do it!" grinned Rook. Together, they made their way to the kitchen. Domino's family was gone, along with the dog. Rook leapt onto the counter and Domino cringed.

"We aren't allowed on there," he said. Rook made a face.

"There's nobody here to stop us," Rook said pointedly. He sniffed about. "MMmm, smells like good food."

"Yeah and it's not ours," added Domino.

"Come on, get up here," said Rook. With a small shake of the head, Domino leapt onto the counter. They sniffed around and Domino showed Rook the snack cupboard.

"I've seen many snacks come out of here," said Domino. "How are we going to open it?"

"Maybe it's a bit like the cage at the farm," Rook said thoughtfully.

"Yes!" exclaimed Domino. "Maybe. Go on, try and open it."

Rook stared at it for another moment then pawed at the metal thing sticking out of the wood. The cupboard door moved but it did not open.

"Maybe...," Rook pushed his paw down, the metal bit did not move. He sighed. He tried fiddling with it. Finally, Rook managed to snap back the metal thing. The door swung open, ajar. Domino stared, his mouth wide open, his eyes sparkling.

"Oh my gosh, the moment I've been waiting for my whole life. The snack cupboard is open! Let's feast!" exclaimed Domino. Rook took in the delicious smell of food. They started to pull out packets of food, some of it tumbled out onto the ground. Rook and Domino leapt down and started licking up the crumbs of cookies, small cakes, popcorn and cereal. Rook had never tasted anything quite like it. The tastes burst into his mouth. It was crunchy but easy to chew. Everything had a different and unique taste.

"Wow!" said Rook. The two cats pilaged the cupboard, digging up as much food as they could. Some packets fell onto the ground and food tumbled out of it. Other packets were closed and no matter what the two cats did, there was no opening the packets. Finally, Rook was stuffed and Domino was laying on the ground, burping.

"I'm full but I can't seem to stop," said Rook, taking a bite of a potato chip. Suddenly, there was a click. Rook stopped and leapt to his feet. He listened hard. Domino did the same. The cats stared at the front door. They heard the faint sound of crying and the loud steps of a four-legged animal. There was some muffled talking. Rook and Domino shot each other looks.

"They're back," Rook said unnecessarily. "Let's get out of here." They didn't argue. The shot upstairs to the attic. Rook slipped out and after him went Domino. As they balanced on the wooden beam, they heard the family enter the house.

"Oh my God! Phil! The kitchen!" came a loud pitched voice.

"What is it honey? I'm trying to-" Phil said. "WHAT THE HE-" Rook and Domino were already leaping over the fence and rushing back to Rook's house.

"Wow," laughed Rook, collapsing on the ground outside his house. "That was fun."

"I know," smiled Domino. "I hope I don't get in trouble."

"What are they going to do?" asked Rook. "They didn't see us do it, so they don't know that it was us. Plus, they think we don't

understand what they say. They won't even bother scolding you."
Domino nodded in agreement. The two best friends lay on the grass, breathing heavily and digesting all the food they had had. Rook couldn't help but smile. His life was great.
Nothing could go wrong.

# Chapter 33

"We're becoming apprentices in four days!" cheered Snailkit, bursting out of the nursery. Willowkit jumped. She had been sleeping outside of the nursery for the past half moon. Wrencry had tried to talk her into coming back into the nursery but Willowkit refused. Even Gorsestar had tried to talk to Mintspot, Beetlejaw and finally Willowkit about it, but to no avail. Willowkit remained outside of the nursery. Everynight, she slept outside, a hard bothered sleep.

"Yes!" yelled Acornkit, right behind his brother. They sprinted out of the nursery and towards the camp entrance where the dawn patrol was gathered. Their father, Pigeonflight, was there. They rushed to him and almost climbed all over him. He laughed happily and played with his kits for a while, his eyes were bright with pride and love. He was almost just as excited as them. Willowkit studied them, feeling a deep pang in her heart. She would be becoming an apprentice in nineteen days. She had been counting down. She wanted to be an apprentice so bad now. She wanted to go out of camp, run like she had never run before. She just wanted to run and pretend that her life was great. That everything was awesome. Willowkit sighed. She wished she had never left camp. She wanted to become an apprentice right then.

"Who do you want to be your mentor?" asked Acornkit, appearing behind Willowkit. She jumped and realised that the dawn patrol had already left and she had started daydreaming.

"Um. I don't know," shrugged Willowkit.

"I want Gorsestar to be my mentor," grinned Acornkit.

"He's not going to be your mentor," piped in a voice. It was Snailkit.

"And why not?" snapped Acornkit. "Nobody was talking to you anyways."

"He's going to be my mentor," said Snailkit.

"Whatever," snorted Acornkit, not wanting to make the conversation any longer. "Just go. Nobody wants you here." Willowkit cringed at the harsh words. She admired Acornkit for that. He was confident and smart and intelligent and nice and.... the

list could go on. She wished she could speak up like Acornkit like that. Of course, she couldn't. She was invisible, silent.

"So who do you want to be your mentor. And don't worry. You can say Gorsestar. I don't mind. It's just that when Snailkit says it, it's sooo annoying. He really thinks that Gorsestar is going to pick him to be future leader or something," Acornkit rolled his eyes. Willowkit didn't want Gorsestar to be her mentor. Firstly, she had a feeling that Mintspot and probably therefore Beetlejaw, wouldn't approve.

"I don't know... Maybe Lilypetal," said Willowkit. Lilypetal seemed nice enough.

"If I'm not getting Gorsestar or Doestripe, then I want to Brownclaw or Halestorm, although Halestorm is Dovepaw's mentor...," sighed Acornkit. "Or maybe Fernspring. She seems really really really strong and scary." Willowkit nodded, noting with a pang that she was becoming an apprentice half a moon later than Acornkit.

"Aren't you excited?!" exclaimed Acornkit then something dawned on him. "Ohh. Right. You're not becoming an apprentice in four days... Sorry."

"It's ok," said Willowkit. She tried to shrug it off, "It's not your fault, you know."

"Yeah, well you were really brave to sneak out of camp," said Acornkit.

"I guess...," Willowkit said, unsurely. She hadn't exactly felt brave, sneaking out. "I wasn't really scared..., so how could I have been brave?" Acornkit's eyes went wide.

"wow! You weren't even scared?!" exclaimed Acornkit. Willowkit shrugged.

"Not really...," she said. She definitely hadn't been too scared for her life.

"That makes you even braver," said Acornkit. Willowkit didn't know what to say. She felt a small fluttering in her heart. She smiled.

"Aww, a smile!" grinned Acornkit happily jumping to his feet. "I haven't seen you smile in a long time." Willowkit looked at him sheepishly. She looked into his eyes. He was the only cat she could gaze in the eyes without then quickly looking to the ground. He was the only cat she could be herself around. The only cat she could tell *almost* everything because of course, she would never tell

everything to anybody. She wasn't *that* open.

"I'm going to get something to eat," Willowkit said, wanting to do something. To her surprise and joy, Acornkit asked if they could share.

"Sure," answered Willowkit, a small spring in her step. Maybe everything wasn't so bad afterall. Maybe she was just being pessimistic. As they made their way to the fresh-kill pile. Mintspot stepped in front of Willowkit. Willowkit's stomach dropped. She stopped in her tracks and looked up, unable to meet Mintspot's eye.

"I need to talk to you, for a moment," Mintspot said, eyeing Acornkit by Willowkit's side. Acornkit gave her a slight glare then trotted towards the fresh-kill pile without Willowkit. Mintspot took Willowkit to the side.

"What are you doing with him?" asked Mintspot.

"I just... I was going to get something to eat," Willowkit said in a small voice. This was the first time Mintspot was talking to her in at least a quarter moon. Willowkit hated that she had made Mintspot mad.

"With Acornkit? What did- what do I always tell you about Acornkit? how many times do I have to tell you?" snapped Mintspot. "Honestly, do you have to be such a disappointment. I did everything for you... I- I sacrificed.... whatever, it's not like you would care. You're too selfish." Willowkit hung her head. Selfish. Disappointment. She was selfish, even Mintspot said so. She thought too much about herself. She was always thinking about how great *her own* life would be with Stormkit. How great *her own* life would be if her family were normal. How great *her own* life would be if she was an apprentice and free of her parents. She sighed. She really was selfish. And a disappointment. Mintspot trudged off. Acornkit trotted to Willowkit's side.

"You alright?" he asked. "What did she say?" What was Willowkit supposed to answer? Oh nothing, my Mum just called me selfish and a disappointment, no big deal. Willowkit huffed. She wished she could be the kit that Mintspot wanted. She never knew what she had done to Mintspot, but now it was clear. She was just a disappointment, nothing she did was good enough. Nothing she did could ever measure up to what Stormkit would have been capable of doing.

"Yeah, of course," Willowkit replied. Acornkit didn't believe her. Of course he didn't. It was obvious she wasn't ok. It was

obvious she was lying.

"Let's eat," said Acornkit. Remembering what her mother had said, Willowkit knew she couldn't hang out with Acornkit anymore. Could she chose a great friendship, a really nice and understanding friend, over her mother's will? Maybe. Probably. Of course she had to. She couldn't disappoint her mother more than she already had.

"I'm- I'm not hungry anymore. You go ahead," said Willowkit. "I'm-.... bye." With that, she scurried off. Tears gathered like water at a damn behind Willowkit's eyes. She slipped under the protection of a bush behind the nursery and sobbed. Her whole body shook. She dug her claws into the dirt, taking deep breaths. Finally, she shook herself. What was she doing? She was feeling bad for herself. How selfish was that? She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She slowly calmed down. She was never going to be selfish again.

# Chapter 34

"Saffanah, there is something we must tell you, honey," Diana said gently. Rook sat at the edge of the bed, laying comfortably down. Jeremy was sitting on the right side of Saffanah while Diana was on the otherside. Saffanah cocked her head.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well. The job is secured now," said Jeremy. "And there is something that you're going to have to give up..., when we're going to be moving."

"What is it? Is it Bunny? Or Teddy? Or Rexy?" said Saffanah, motioning to her stuffed animals in the corner of her room.

"Ah no. You'll be able to bring them with you, don't worry," Jeremy told her. She smiled happily.

"Yay. Did you hear that Rook? We'll be able to bring Teddy, Bunny and Rexy with us!" exclaimed Saffanah, talking to Rook. Rook glanced up and smiled. He twitched his tail.

"That's great," he told her. She ran her fingers through his soft fur. He let her, purring softly to tell her that he liked it.

"Mmmm, about that," Jeremy said slowly. He glanced at Diana for help. She nodded that he go on.

"Well..., Rook won't be able to come with us," blurted Jeremy. Rook's ears pricked. He frowned and he stared at Jeremy. His mouth was agape slightly. Had he heard right?

"W-what?" he stammered, confused. Saffanah's eyes went wide.

"What?!" She burst out, pushing her mother's hand away.

"I'm sorry honey," sighed Jeremy. "I understand that you're upset but-"

"Why can't we bring him?! I'm not going if Rook's not going!" cried Saffanah. Rook agreed. He would gladly live with Saffanah in the house alone. Domino would come and visit them sometimes.

"I'm sorry dear, cats aren't allowed where we are going to live and I don't think Rook is going to appreciate the long flight," explained Diana.

"I don't care. Then I'm not going," said Saffanah.

"We're going, we can't change that," said Jeremy. "I'm sorry honey. I really am. Rook is part of this family."

"Yeah, so we're going to leave him?" snapped Saffanah, almost in tears. Rook frowned, he dug his claws into the blanket. He wanted to rush to Domino's and tell him all about it. He didn't want to be left behind. He couldn't be left behind. This was his family. How could they leave him?

"I'm so sorry honey," sighed Diana. "The housing area we're living in have a strict rule for pets."

"No. No. I'm not leaving Rook. I don't want to go," said Saffanah firmly. Jeremy cast Diana a look. Rook glared at them, feeling just as defiant as Saffanah. If they were going, he was going with them. He didn't know where, but he didn't care. As long as he was with them.

"Honey, we've got to go. It's a job of a lifetime, plus, everything has been planned," Jeremy said firmly.

"Except the part that we take him with us!" exclaimed Saffanah angrily.

"Sorry honey," said Jeremy. "I really really am."

"Yeah we're really sorry. But we're going to find Rook the best home possible. And we can come visit him," promised Diana.

"No," cried Saffanah, in tears. Rook slipped under her arm and cuddled nearer to her. She gripped him, keeping him close. "We can't leave him. We can't leave him. No."

"I'm so sorry honey," said Diana softly. "So sorry." She attempted to give Saffanah a hug but Saffanah pushed her away.

"I don't want to talk to you. Go away!" screamed Saffanah. Jeremy tried to talk to her but she yelled over him. Finally, Diana and Jeremy retreated from her room, closing her door behind them gently. Saffanah cried into Rook's fur. He let her, feeling her love. He wanted to stay with her forever. He would follow them. Wherever they were going, he was going to follow them. He had to. He couldn't leave Saffanah. What was she going to do without him?

"I'm never going to leave you," Saffanah said. An empty promise.

# Chapter 35

Willowkit stared through the leaves, sitting on a rock. She craned her neck over the crowd of cats. Standing proudly on the small stump was Gorsestar.

"Acornkit**,** you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Acornpaw. Your mentor will be Sootwhisker . I hope Sootwhiser will pass down all he knows to you," declared Gorsestar.

"Sootwhisker**,** you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from (former mentor), and you have shown yourself to be brace and strong. You will be the mentor of Acornpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Acornpaw," continued Gorsestar. Acornpaw turned to his brother, Snailpaw and they grinned at each other. Acornpaw touched noses with Sootwhisker. Willowkit spotted Wrencry and Pigeonflight leaning against each other. Their tails twirled. They looked at their kits with pure pride and joy. Willowkit's eyes flitted to her own parents. They were part of the mass of cats gathered in front of the small stump. They were sitting together but they just stared at the two kits up on the small stump without any emotion. They had slight smiles plastered on their faces. Willowkit wondered what they were thinking about. She sighed. Acornpaw's eyes swept the clearing and then finally landed on Willowkit. He flashed her a happy smile. Willowkit smiled back. She was happy for him. She really was. In half a moon, it would be her turn. It would be different. In many ways. For one, her parents would never look at her like Wrencry and Pigeonflight looked at their kits. As the Clan erupted into cheers, Willowkit slipped into the nursery. It was empty. Big and empty. She could sleep in there now. Alone. She didn't know if that was good or bad. She felt a small shiver run through her spine. Then through all the loud commotion outside, she heard some shuffling. She turned around and there, at the nursery entrance was Acornpaw.

"Hey," he smiled. "I saw you leave once the ceremony was over. You alright?"

"Yeah, congratulations," nodded Willowkit, forcing a smile.

"You only need to wait half a moon more. You've already waited six moons..., half a moon will be *nothing*. Plus, I'll still come and visit you," promised Acornpaw.

"Thanks," smiled Willowkit. She was touched. "But you'll be busy. Don't bother."

"You look sad," sighed Acornpaw.

"I think Sootwhisker's calling you," Willowkit said. Indeed Sootwhisker was calling Acornpaw, seeming slightly frustrated. Acornpaw quickly rushed outside, making a sorry face.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I was just talking to Willowkit," explained Acornpaw.

"Is she an excuse for not being here?" demanded Sootwhisker.

"No, sorry," sighed Acornpaw.

"Do you want to see the territory or do you want to chat to the kit?" asked Sootwhisker demandingly.

"I want to see the territory," replied Acornpaw.

"Good, let's go," said Sootwhisker. Acornpaw's face lit up. Finally, he was going to go out of camp. Willowkit watched then slipped back into the nursery. She curled into a ball and stiffled a small sob. A cat poked her head into the nursery. A small hope flickered in Willowkit's heart. Mintspot?

"Willowkit," said a gentle voice. It was Wrencry. Willowkit didn't lift her head.

"Hi," she said.

"Are you alright?" asked Wrencry.

"Why wouldn't I be?" answered Willowkit. "I'm fine." she wasn't being sarcastic.

"I'm sorry," sighed Wrencry. "Do you want me to stay in the nursery with you, tonight?" Wrencry padded to Willowkit's side and lay down beside her. Willowkit could feel her warmth. She wanted to cuddle into Wrencry's stomach and bury her head into her soft fur. But she knew that Mintspot would definitely agree. She could already see Mintspot yelling at her.

"AM I NOT ENOUGH FOR YOU?! Fine, go on, if you don't like me, you can find another mother," Mintspot would say.

"No. I prefer being alone," said Willowkit. She didn't know if she meant it. She wanted to be alone, so nobody would see her

suffering. but she also didn't want to be lonely. She just wanted to cuddle with somebody to keep warm, somebody that loved her.

# Chapter 36

"You can live with me," suggested Domino.

"Thanks. But..., I don't want them to leave me. How could they even say they're going to leave me?" sighed Rook sadly.

"I don't know, man... I- I don't know what to say. I know the baby cries all the time and the dog is so annoying but... I mean, I would miss them if they were gone," said Domino.

"They can't leave me. They won't leave me, right?" Rook said, frowning.

"'course not. I bet it was just some sort of joke or misunderstanding," nodded Domino.

"Yeah, of course," said Rook unsurely. That evening, as he padded thoughtfully back to the house, he found Saffanah already in bed and Diana in her room. Only Jeremy was up. Rook approached Jeremy who was pacing back and forth in the living room. He held his phone to his ear and he looked stressed and frustrated.

"No.. no, he's not-... No, he is not a kitten anymore," Jeremy was saying. Rook frowned. Kitten? Jeremy was talking about him. Rook leapt onto the couch and pricked his ears. He listened. He was scared of what he was about to hear but he had to listen.

"I told you, he's only about six months old. He's still young. Yes, he's still growing," said Jeremy. He ran his fingers through his hair, staring out of the window. "Yeah, he loves kids. He's really gentle and calm. You don't have to worry about him. He sleeps on my daughter's bed." Jeremy listened as the person on the other line chattered away.

"Right. Ok. Great. Thanks. Make sure to call back," said Jeremy. He sighed, falling onto the couch. He spotted Rook and gave him a light pat on the head. "Hey Rook. It's hard, finding the right family for you. Don't worry though. I'll make sure you get the best people possible."

"What do you mean? You're my family!" Rook meowed. Jeremy's phone rung. He jumped up and answered it enthusiastically.

"Hello. Eh- Emily, yes! Yes. Yeah no, I'm free... Of course,"

Jeremy said, looking extremely concentrated. "He'll just have to get used to you but once he does, I promise you he'll be the best cat anybody could ask for. That's what he is to us... He's part of our family, you know.... I mean yeah, of course it's hard. We don't want to leave him. But we have to. There's no way we can bring him, where we're going. I'm just trying to find another great family for him...." There was a pause. "Yeah yeah of course. How about tomorrow? At around 3pm? Yeah sure sure. Thank you. See you then." Jeremy put the phone down and cheered. He grinned at Rook.

"We're going to meet your new family tomorrow," said Jeremy. "Happy?" Rook gave him a blank look. New family?

"I don't- I don't want a new family," protested Rook sadly. How were they leaving him? he would never do that to them.

Rook stared out of the window. The scenery rushed by quickly. Saffanah was sitting on the seat beside him, looking grim. Diana turned back to check on Saffanah and Rook.

"How you guys doing?" she asked. Jeremy glanced at them from the rear mirror.

"Bad," huffed Saffanah. "Rook is sad. He shouldn't have to meet a stupid new family. He should stay with us."

"We talked about this," sighed Jeremy. "Right, we're almost there." Rook sighed and sat back down. He lay down and curled his tail around his snout. He closed his eyes and pushed away the bad thoughts. He managed to rest until the car finally came to a stop. They had stopped in front of a cute house with red bricks. There were pretty red roses growing along the white picket fence. The small garden had short, well groomed grass. Jeremy stepped out of the car followed by Diana and then Saffanah. Saffanah helped Rook out, keeping him in her arms. Rook let Saffanah carry him, without making a noise. He took in the new views. The smells were totally different as well. Rook sniffed. He smelt something delicious and fresh roses. His nose tingled. He meowed and twitched his tail.

"See? I'm sure he loves this place," grinned Jeremy. Diana rung the door bell. There was some shouting and shuffling from inside then a cheery looking woman opened the door. She had blonde hair and gentle eyes. She wore a light blue knitted sweater and some jeans. She beamed brightly when she saw the family at the front step.

"Hello!" she greeted.

"hello, I'm Jeremy," Jeremy said, shaking her hand warmly. Emily then hugged Diana friendly.

"Oh my gosh. And this must be your daughter, Saffanah, right? Lovely name," said Emily, bending down. Saffanah gave a small nod. Emily then ran her fingers through Rook's soft fur. Rook froze, grimacing.

"Aw. This must be Rook. He's so cute," cooed Emily.

"Yes, he is, isn't he?" chided Diana.

"Oh, I'm sorry, come in come in," Emily said, letting the family in. "Kids! Matt! Come here." Two small boys around the age of eleven appeared. They were wearing identical clothes and they gave the family weird looks.

"This is Rick and Andrew. Rick, Andrew, this is our new cat," Emily said, pointing at Rook. Rook glared at them. They didn't seem to notice. Andrew walked forward and put his hand awkwardly on Rook. He then shrugged.

"He seems ok," he said, not seeming to care. Rick didn't approach Rook. The two boys then retreated into the living room where Emily offered Jeremy, Saffanah and Diana a seat. Matt, the husband then appeared from the kitchen. He smiled at them warmly. He wore an apron.

"Hello hello Rook's family!" he said warmly. After everybody had been introduced, Emily brought out a freshly baked apple pie that Matt had baked.

"Here you all go," said Emily, serving everybody a large slice. Saffanah put Rook down on her lap. Rook watched everything with sharp eyes. Rick and Andrew ate their food in the corner, Rick was on a tablet while Andrew was staring at his parents.

"Oh and of course, for you," grinned Emily. She then took a small slice and held it in front of Rook. Rook sniffed it, his ears perking up. It smelt delicious. Was it for him? He smiled brightly. Then he gentle took it out of her hand and gobbled it down. It was warm and sweet. He licked his lips. He loved it. His mood suddenly lifted and he stared at Emily expectantly.

"He wants more!" laughed Jeremy.

"We don't normally feed him human food," scowled Saffanah. "It can be bad for him."

"Oh I'm sure he has eaten plenty of human food when he goes out," Emily said, brushing it off. They then started a long

conversation about houses, cats and food. Rook knew that this would be his *new* family. He still didn't understand exactly why. He didn't want to live with Rick, Andrew, Emily and Matt. They were nice but... they weren't *his* family. He curled up against Saffanah protectively. He squeezed his eyes shut, wishing the moment would last longer.

# Chapter 37

"It's weird, isn't it?" said Acornpaw. "It's almost Leaf-fall."

"Yeah," shrugged Willowkit. They were sitting right outside the nursery. Acornpaw, even after becoming an apprentice, had not stopped talking to Willowkit. Snailpaw, had completely stopped paying attention to Willowkit, not that he had paid her any attention before.

"Aren't you glad you're becoming an apprentice very soon," said Acornpaw.

"Yeah," said Willowkit unenthusiastically. Now that the time was approaching, she was more scared. She was scared that it might not be what she imagined. Maybe her mentor would hate her. Maybe she would fail everything. What if she couldn't hunt? What if she couldn't fight? What if she was a failure? What if she couldn't run fast enough? She had to be able to run fast enough. She had never practised running. While Snailkit and Acornkit used to race each other all the time, Willowkit had never raced in her life. She wished she had.

"Are you nervous?" asked Acornpaw.

"Maybe... a little," Willowkit said truthfully.

"Why? There's nothing to be worried about," assured Acornpaw.

"What if I can't do anything," sighed Willowkit.

"What do you mean? Of course you won't be able to fight or hunt... *yet*. But your mentor will teach you. You're not supposed to know everything right away, you know," Acornpaw said.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right," said Willowkit thoughtfully. "Thanks."

"No problem," smiled Acornpaw.

"Acornpaw!" called Whitepaw from the apprentice den. "Are you coming?"

"Yeah! Two seconds!" replied Acornpaw. He turned to Willowkit and smiled. "Sorry, I got to go. We're going to go out and practise fighting together."

"Oh ok. See you," said Willowkit. She watched as Acornpaw trotted towards Snailkit, Whitepaw and Dovepaw. Then

together, they excitedly ducked out of camp and were gone. Willowkit sat there, watching the camp for a few more moments until her father trotted towards her. *Towards* her. She froze, her ears pointing forward. She hadn't talked to Beetlejaw since the day before and all they had said was "Hi".

"Willowkit," Beetlejaw said, smiling. It was a small smile but his eyes twinkled, genuinely happy.

"B-beetlejaw," Willowkit replied. She didn't know what he was going to say but she was almost shaking with anticipation. She only knew that she couldn't let him down.

"You're an apprentice in five days," stated Beetlejaw.

"Yeah," said Willowkit. Her mind raced. What else could she say? That she missed him? No, that would be idiotic. That she was glad that he was back from patrol? No, that would be dumb. That she was excited to become an apprentice? No..., he wouldn't care about that. That she was scared at the same time to become an apprentice? No.., he'd think she was a failure.

"Are you nervous?" asked Beetlejaw. Willowkit knew what she had to answer to that.

"No," she lied, wanting to make him proud. Beetlejaw nodded. Willowkit almost grinned in relief. He was probably very proud of her.

"Well, are you excited?" asked Beetlejaw. Oh no, thought Willowkit, she was not talking enough which meant that Beetlejaw had to ask questions to keep the conversation going.

"Yeah. I'm really excited. I keep wondering who's going to be my mentor. Is it possible for you to be my mentor? I don't think so. I mean, it would be weird if your Mum or Dad was your mentor. You know-" Willowkit stopped in her tracks and took a deep breath. What was she doing? He probably didn't care. Why was she talking too much? Beetlejaw glanced down, wondering why she had suddenly stopped talking. He loved listening to her voice. He loved how the words just flowed out. He didn't understand why she would sometimes stop in the middle of her sentence. He wanted to listen to her more. He willed her to talk more. Willowkit hung her head. She had probably bored Beetlejaw to death. She kept her mouth shut, waiting for him to leave or ask another question. Beetlejaw saw Willowkit looking down at her paws. She must want me to leave, he thought silently. He knew that he wasn't the best father. He wished he could be. He wished that Stormkit could just be left in

the past. He wanted to focus on the kit he still had. Willowkit. But that wasn't what Mintspot wanted and if it hurt Mintspot to leave Stormkit in the past, Beetlejaw would not do that.

"Goodnight," Beetlejaw said finally.

"Goodnight," replied Willowkit in a small voice.

# Chapter 38

Rook watched as Saffanah started packing her things into the large boxes at the side of her room. He felt a cold shiver run through his spine. Saffanah moved slowly and sadly.

"Saffanah, are you done yet?" Diana asked, poking her head into the room. She saw that practically nothing was done. "Saffanah...."

"I'm doing it," protested Saffanah.

"I know you're sad dear," sighed Diana, sitting on the bed and running her fingers through Saffanah's long hair.

"Why do we have to go?" sobbed Saffanah.

"Because... it's really important to your Dad. Do you think you could be strong, for him?" asked Diana. Rook pricked his ears. Strong? They were going to leave him! He felt angry, betrayed. But deep down, he knew that the family loved him a lot. He knew that leaving him would be one of the hardest things for them.

"Just finish one box and Dad and John will do the rest, ok?" Diana said gently. Saffanah nodded. Diana stepped out of the room but not before giving Rook a small scratch behind the ear. Saffanah stared blankly at the wall ahead.

"I don't want to leave you," Saffanah said. "I'm not going." Rook was touched but he knew she had to go. He wanted to live with her. Maybe alone in a big house with a lot of human food. But... he knew that she needed Diana and Jeremy. They were her parents. Humans needed their parents more than cats did. Rook never knew his parents afterall. When Saffanah finished packing one of her boxes, she jogged downstairs for lunch. Rook trotted down and was about to curl up on the couch, to listen to the family and their friend John talking when Domino poked his head into the house from the front door flap.

"Hey," he said then spotted the family. He quickly retreated outside. Rook slipped out after him.

"hey," he replied.

"Why are there loads of boxes outside and that huge truck?" asked Domino, nodding at the large moving truck in the driveway and the boxes all around it. A man and woman were

sitting at the back of the open truck, chatting and snacking on sandwiches.

"They're moving, remember?" said Rook.

"Wow. I didn't think it'd be so soon," sighed Domino. "SO when are you moving into my house?" Rook frowned.

"I'm not- I'm not moving into your house," Rook said.

"W-why not?" asked Domino, slightly indignant.

"I can't. They've found me a new home," sighed Rook.

"So? Don't tell me you're going to go along with it?" asked Domino.

"i'm hardly going to run away," said Rook. He had accepted his fate, although he didn't like it.

"Yeah, you can. I mean, you don't want to live with some weird family that you don't know, right?" Domino said.

"I don't know. I guess I am. The Mum feeds me human food," Rook said, trying to point out the positive.

"I don't care! You've got to live with me. Or at least somewhere *near,"* Domino said.

"I want to. I really do," said Rook, hanging his head.

"We won't see each other if you go live with that other family!" cried Domino.

"Of course we will. I'll find you. I promise," Rook said.

"You better. Or I will hunt that family down till I find you then I will kill that family," Domino said angrily.

"Right..., I don't know how you're going to do that but thanks," grinned Rook.

"Hey, I can be deadly when I'm mad!" exclaimed Domino.

"Of course," Rook said, rolling his eyes.

"So you promise you'll come and see me, preferably everyday, when you go to your new family?" Domino said.

"I promise," promised Rook. With that, the best friends parted and Rook returned to his home. Although, he thought sadly, it wouldn't be his home for very long anymore.

# Chapter 39

Willowkit was becoming an apprentice. The day had finally come. She didn't know what she was feeling. She could barely stay still. As soon as she had woken up, all alone in the nursery, she had felt more... alive. As she waited for Gorsestar to call the Clan together, she sat behind the bushes, licking herself. She had seen other parents licking their kits before the ceremony, making them look pretty. But she knew she didn't have that kind of parents, she had to do it herself. She would make them proud. She would be pretty and confident on the small stump. Finally, the time came when Gorsestar leapt onto the small stump. With a loud confident voice, he called the Clan together. Trembling with emotion, Willowkit stepped out of the shadows. She was still behind everybody else as they all gathered around, but she knew she would soon be the center of attention. She spotted Mintspot on the otherside of the clearing. Mintspot had her eyes on Gorsestar. Willowkit tried to catch her eye but Mintspot did not turn to see Willowkit. Beetlejaw slipped in beside Mintspot and glanced around the clearing. He spotted Willowkit and gave her a small smile but she missed it. Feeling slightly more alone, without the support of her parents, Willowkit shrunk back.

"Willowkit," Gorsestar called. Willowkit jumped. She gulped as all eyes turned onto her. She looked down at her paws and slowly made her way to the front. As she clambered onto the small stump, she felt her whole body freeze.

"*Willowkit*, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Willowpaw. Your mentor will be Brownclaw. I hope Brownclaw will pass down all he knows on to you," declared Gorsestar loudly. Many thoughts rushed through Willowpaw's mind. Willow*paw*. Willowpaw felt a small smile spread on her face. Although she was totally and utterly alone, she was now an apprentice. That was enough. Brownclaw stepped up onto the small stump, looking confident and proud.

"Brownclaw, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from Fawnpelt, and you have

shown yourself to be brave and confident. You will be the mentor of Willowpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Willowpaw," Gorsestar finished. Brownclaw stepped towards Willowpaw. Willowpaw felt a jolt through her spine. She had to touch noses with her new mentor. Taking a deep breath she touched noses with Brownclaw. He stared into her eyes for a moment. She didn't flinch. She was an apprentice now.

"You're going to make WindClan proud," whispered Brownclaw and he meant it.

"Willowpaw!" came a loud cheer. Willowpaw's head jerked up and in the crowd, her gaze landed on the cat that had yelled out her name. Acornpaw. She wasn't so alone afterall. She flashed him a small smile. He grinned back, his eyes saying, *I'm proud*.

"Willowpaw! Willowpaw! Willowpaw!" the cries followed. Willowpaw leapt off the small stump. Cats came to congratulate her, she didn't pay attention to any of them. Finally, she found herself in front of Acornpaw. She stared into his eyes. They were soft and hazel coloured.

"You're an apprentice. Congratulations Willowpaw," he said. He meant it. She knew he did.

"Thank you," smiled Willowpaw. As she returned to Brownclaw, she could not see Mintspot or Beetlejaw.

"Are you ready to see our territory?" asked Brownclaw.

"Yes," smiled Willowpaw. "I am." For real this time. Brownclaw led her out of camp. Willowpaw took in everything. There were tall trees surrounding the camp. Brownclaw led Willowpaw towards ThunderClan border. They emerged from the trees into a vast field. Long grasses grew. They danced gently in the wind. Willowpaw took in a deep breath. The smell of the wind flowing swiftly was sweet.

"Right across this is ThunderClan border. See those trees there?" asked Brownclaw. Willowpaw nodded. "Yep, it's right there. How about we race?" Race? "Let's see how fast you are." Willowpaw felt a stab of fear in her stomach but before she could say anything, Brownclaw was off. She saw the grasses rustling in front of her. He sped off like the wind. Without thinking, Willowpaw was right behind. She leapt into the tall grasses and ran. The grasses seemed to part for her as she streaked after Brownclaw. She couldn't see him anymore but she could sense him. Her paws were light on the ground. They barely touched the ground before they were off and

into the air. Willowpaw's ears were pressed back against her head. The wind brushed against her fur. She felt as if the wind was helping her, running right beside her. She had never felt anything like it. The exhilaration was amazing. After a few seconds, she sensed Brownclaw right in front of her. She kept running. Her muscles seemed to relax instead of tensing. Her whole body was in rhythm. She had never gone this fast before. Before Brownclaw knew it, Willowpaw had overtaken him. He was startled as she flashed past him. He pushed harder, his large paws thudding to the ground before pushing him forward. His muscles tensed as he pushed forward, the grass hitting his face. As he finally emerged from the grasses, Willowpaw was already there, waiting. Her face was twisted into a wide smile. Brownclaw took deep breaths and smiled at his apprentice. Wow. Willowpaw stared at Brownclaw, wondering why he had let her win. It was nice of him to do that.

"That was good. No, that was great," grinned Brownclaw. "I- wow. Come on, this is ThunderClan territory." Brownclaw said as they stepped into a darker area of large trees. As they made their way nearer to ThunderClan, Willowkit sniffed. She smelt something horrid. It made her nose wrinkle.

"Ugh," she muttered, wondering why Brownclaw couldn't smell it.

"That's ThunderClan for you," Brownclaw said, hearing her.

"Huh?" said Willowpaw.

"that's what they smell like," Brownclaw explained. They reached the border where the stench was strongest. Willowkit frowned.

"Oh. Ew," she said.

"Yeah, doesn't smell great," shrugged Brownclaw. "We need to mark it." He said, showing her how to mark the border. "We don't want those little rats crossing the border."

"Right," nodded Willowpaw.

"Let's go," said Brownclaw. "There's much more to see." Willowpaw trotted after him eagerly. Being an apprentice was definitely better than being a kit. Brownclaw was a good mentor as well. He was so nice to her. As they made their way towards ShadowClan territory, Willowpaw couldn't help but think about Acornpaw. The first cat to say her new name. The first cat to make her feel less lonely. The only cat to make her feel less lonely. Her

only friend. Her best friend. She just wished he thought the same of her. He was just too nice. He probably never thought about her. She wished he did. Because the thought of him..., it made her feel something she had never felt before. Happiness? Joy? No. Hope. He made her feel hope. Hope for the future. Something she never thought about.

# Chapter 40

They were moving out the next day. His family was moving out. Leaving him behind..., with another family. Rook sighed and curled up on Saffanah's bed beside her. For the last time. He heard her snoring gently and tried to remember this moment.

Rook awoke to Saffanah petting him on the head.

"Are you ready?" asked Diana, walking into the room. She smiled when she saw Saffanah petting Rook. "You sure you packed everything that's his?"

"Yes," nodded Saffanah. She scooped Rook up into her arms. She followed Diana out of the room and downstairs. Jeremy was at the open front door. He held a plastic bag in one hand with many notes about Rook's food, diet, health issues and vets. It also contained a few treats and Rook's brush. In Jeremy's other hand was Rook's carrier. Inside was one of Rook's bed that they had bought for him but he never used, a towel which Rook sometimes used to sleep on or that they used to clean him when he was wet. There was also the half empty packet of Rook's food, water and food bowls and a few more things of Rook's.

"Let's go," said Jeremy. "We need to get back as soon as possible." Diana nodded and herded Saffanah into the car. The AirCon was already on and Rook stretched as he settled on Saffanah's lap. The car drove off. Rook watched the countryside pass by. He felt a sad stab in the stomach. The whole ride was quiet, nobody knowing what to say. Diana had her arms crossed across her chest and Jeremy looked slightly down. When they arrived, Rook's new family were all standing outside, waiting. They welcomed Saffanah's family and Rook with open arms.

"Here, let me take him," said Emily, taking Rook from Saffanah. Rook stiffened and without thinking, he leapt out of her arms. Emily let out a small "oh" and jumped back. Rook shook himself and glared at her. He trotted back to Saffanah's side. Saffanah looked smug.

"Oh, I think he knows you're going to leave him," Emily said,

brushing it off. Matt took the things from Jeremy's hands.

"Please take care of him. And send pictures and videos," said Diana.

"Of course of course!" Emily assured them. "Do you want to come in for a drink?"

"Oh no, we're very busy, thank you though," Jeremy smiled.

"Goodbye Rook, we're going to miss you so much," Diana sighed, bending down. She hugged Rook close. He snuggled up to her. He couldn't help but forgive her for leaving him. Jeremy pet Rook lovingly.

"You're going to like your new family," He said, mostly to himself.

"Bye Rooky..," whispered Saffanah. "I love you."

"I love you too," cried Rook sadly. He was suddenly lifted off the ground by Emily. She waved at Diana, Jeremy and Saffanah.

"Good luck with the move," she said with a bright smile. Rook watched as his family retreated to the car. He felt his eyes prickling. He felt his whole body sag. He felt his energy crumbling. He just hung in Emily's arms. Then Emily turned around and marched Rook back into the house. He got one last glimpse of his family. They were watching from the car, their eyes shining with tears. Then they were gone.

# Chapter 41

"Take this nest!" grinned Acornpaw enthusiastically, leading Willowpaw to the nest right next to his. "We can be right next to each other. How was your first day of training?"

"Good. Tiring," shrugged Willowkit. She curled up in the nest Acornpaw had pointed at. He gladly slipped into his. He cocked his head.

"You don't seem to happy," he noticed. "Was Brownclaw mean?"

"No," said Willowpaw. "He's so nice. I'm just- I don't know..." Willowpaw sighed. She hadn't seen her parents after she had got back from her first day of apprenticeship. She wanted to talk to Mintspot. So badly. She didn't care that Mintspot hadn't really ever been very warm or motherly to her. She just wanted to talk to her. To tell her all about her day. One of the best days of her life. But when she had gotten back into camp, Mintspot had been talking to Beetlejaw. She had run up to them, her eyes bright with excitement. It was like she had forgotten how things worked.

"We're talking right now," Mintspot had say, brushing Willowpaw away just like that.

"Is it about your parents?" asked Acornpaw softly. Willowpaw raised her head. This was the first time anybody had pointed aloud the fact that somebody had noticed that her parents were upsetting her.

"Uh. Yeah," nodded Willowpaw. "I guess so. I mean, they haven't really *done* anything to me...."

"Yeah, they don't do much with you," nodded Acornpaw then watched Willowpaw's reaction to see if he had overstepped.

"I guess," shrugged Willowpaw. She was used to it. She just wished for once, they would pay attention to her. They would be glad to hear about her day. They would just be glad to *see* her.

"I'm glad to see you," said Acornpaw. Willowpaw smiled.

"Thanks," she said, her mood quickly lightened.

"Have you guys tried hunting yet?" asked Acornpaw, showing interest in her day. That was enough for her. She was glad for his company. She was glad for this... friendship.

"Not yet. Brownclaw said we might start the basics tomorrow though," said Willowpaw.

"I've only managed to catch a mouse so far," sighed Acornpaw. "I'm not very good at hunting. I'm more of a tracker I guess. I'm not a very skilled fighter either...." Acornpaw sighed sadly. "My parents said it doesn't matter, they said I'll learn. But... Snailpaw has caught three crows, a mouse and a vole! Plus, even Dovepaw said he's really good."

"You don't have to be instantly good at fighting," said Willowpaw. "I'm sure you're going to improve. Maybe you'll even be better than Snailpaw."

"hopefully," grinned Acornpaw.

"I just- I have a question," Willowpaw said slowly.

"What is it?" asked Acornpaw.

"Are- are we friends?" asked Willowpaw. She was ready for him to say no. She expected him to say no. She just had to hear him say it out aloud.

"Of course," exclaimed Acornpaw. "I've already told you before. You're my best friend." Willowpaw smiled. Small tears were sparkling in her eyes.

"Hey, you're Mintspot's kit," interrupted a voice. Dovepaw, Whitepaw and Snailpaw were standing at the den entrance.

"Yeah," said Willowpaw, not knowing what it implied.

"Stay away from me. You're bad luck," growled Whitepaw, raising his eyebrows. He stalked to his nest, on the otherside of the den. Dovepaw shot Willowpaw a look then trotted after her brother. Snailpaw walked over to Acornpaw, ignoring Willowpaw.

"Why is she sleeping right next to you?" asked Snailpaw.

"Cos," shrugged Acornpaw. "I don't need to explain anything to you."

"You're my brother. I'm just looking out for you," Snailpaw said with a shrug.

"Don't worry about Willowpaw. Worry about those two," retorted Acornpaw, nodding at the two older apprentices.

"Why? Cos they're going to become awesome warriors. Although I'll totally be better than them?" said Snailpaw. He sighed. "Whatever. Talk to me when you've stopped talking to *her*." Willowpaw looked down at her paws. She didn't say anything. It

didn't come as a surprise that Acornpaw and the other apprentices didn't like her. Although she had stayed with Snailpaw in the same nursery for 6 moons, they never had been very close.

"Ignore him," huffed Acornpaw, glaring at his brother.

"No. Don't. He's right. The other apprentices won't like you if you hang out with me. I'm- I'm a nobody," sighed Willowpaw.

"You're my best friend!" exclaimed Acornpaw. Willowpaw frowned and let out a small growl.

"Stop it. You shouldn't lie to yourself," Willowpaw snapped, much harsher than she intended.

"I'm not!" replied Acornpaw indignantly. "Don't say that. You know it's not true."

"You're like the rest of them!" hissed Willowpaw. She had never said anything louder or angrier before. "You're not my friend! You're even worst than them! At least they don't pretend to be my friend. You're full of lies." Acornpaw looked hurt, his eyes were shining with tears. He gulped and leapt out of his nest. Then he trotted towards the other apprentices. His brother turned to him, his eyes lighting up. The other apprentices invited Acornpaw to their group happily. He didn't turn back. Snailpaw shot a look at Willowpaw. She held her eyes closed and curled up in a ball. Alone, once more.

# Chapter 42

Rook curled up in the corner of the living room, his eyes sharp and ears pointed forward. Rick was much more talkative than he had had been when meeting Rook's former owners. Now, he taunted Rook.

"Come get this mouse!" screamed Rick, dangling a toy mouse in his hand. He dragged it in front of Rook. Rook felt his fur rise. He wanted to run away but the family had not given him any chance of escaping.

"Stop annoying the cat," said Andrew, playing on his computer.

"He's so boring," snorted Rick, dropping the mouse on the ground. "He can't do anything."

"What do you want him to do?" asked Matt, raising an eyebrow. "He's just a cat."

"Yeah. Ugh, a dog would be so much better," huffed Rick. He slumped onto the couch. Emily, who was working, looked up.

"You're not getting a dog until you show us that you can take care of the cat," Emily said firmly. "Have you fed him dinner yet?"

"No, I'll do it later," Rick said dismissively. Rook had had enough. He slunk off. He trotted uptstairs to the masterbedroom. He knew he was not allowed there.

"Hey, go check what he's doing!" said Andrew.

"You go," replied Rick.

"You're never getting a dog like this," warned Emily.

"Fine!" Rook's eyes lit up as he leapt onto the soft red bed. The window was open. Without thinking, he threw himself out. He felt the wind whip his face. His world swirled. He was falling uncontrollably. He twisted himself and suddenly, he felt the ground, hard under his paws. Without thinking, he shot off down the road. He was out. He had escaped. Now he had to find his real family. Everything was different. Even the smell was slightly different. The houses were different shapes, with different colours. Rook kept his eyes peeled for any sign of his family. Finally, he reached a large field. Beyond the field were more large fields, some wild, some

growing crop. The fields were dotted with small villages and lone houses. Beyond that was a rocky surface and beyond that, trees. Forest! It must be the same forest he could see from his old home. With a spring in his step, Rook went towards the forest. He walked with determination, his eyes glued to his destination. He trotted through large fields, ignoring the pain in his paws and his growling stomach. Rook had reached the end of a wheat field when he finally stopped. He collapsed on the ground, beneath the shade of some trees. He glanced up, realising that the sun was starting to set already. Rook blinked. He heard the trickling of water. Getting up once more, he edged towards the sound of water. He found a small stream. He gladly drank the water. He thought about continuing but his body begged him to rest. He gave in. He slipped under a bush and curled up. He shivered as the cold slowly seeped through his fur as the night progressed. He didn't complain. He was going to find Saffanah. He was going to find his family. He was going to see Domino again. It didn't matter that his stomach was empty. That his pads were bleeding and his muscles aching. All that mattered was that he got to that forest.

# Chapter 43

Willowpaw bounded after her mentor. Brownclaw finally stopped in a small clearing with short grasses.

"Warmed up?" asked Brownclaw.

"Yeah," nodded Willowpaw, breathing heavily. Trees in RiverClan were losing leaves and the air was getting colder and colder. Willowpaw didn't know what to expect with leaf bare.

"Right, we're going to do some hunting today," said Brownclaw. "You ready?"

"Yeah," nodded Willowpaw determinedly. Brownclaw showed Willowpaw the positions. They practised none stop until Willowpaw was able to crouch and crawl without making noise. Willowpaw crouched down, her ears pointed forward, her tail low to the ground. She edged forward, letting the grasses brush past her silently. There was a rustle. Willowpaw sprung forward and tumbled into a large brown thing. She rolled to the ground, her heart beating fast. Her claws dug into the ground and she quickly pulled herself up, ready for whatever danger was to come.

"Good job," praised Brownclaw.

"Oh," was all Willowpaw could say, sighing in relief.

"Shouldn't pounce if you don't know what it is though," joked Brownclaw. "I think you're ready to catch some real prey."

"Yeah," grinned Willowpaw excitedly.

"Right, then let's do it. Remember what I told you. All your senses need to be sharp. There is no time to doze off. You must be keen on your sense," Brownclaw reminded Willowpaw. Willowpaw nodded enthusiastically. Taking a deep breath, Willowpaw made her way through the tall grasses silently, listening for any sound of prey. Her ears were pointed forward, listening for anything. Suddenly, she felt a small vibration under her feet. Her nose sniffed. She smelt vole. She could have missed it. Willowpaw's heart was beating so fast she was scared the vole might hear it. Gulping, Willowpaw crouched down. She slowly edged forward. One paw at the time. She made sure she could hear or smell the vole at all time. She could feel the earth vibrate slightly as the vole scurried about, looking for food. Willowpaw stopped suddenly, the rustling seemed

so near. Her ears were pricked forward, her eyes locked on where she thought the vole was. Slowly, she crawled towards the noise. Then suddenly, there was a squeak and a blur of brown. Willowpaw jumped almost in surprise but quickly caught herself. With speed, she shot her front paw forward. She felt the vole's body rub against her paw but in a flash, it was gone. Willowpaw's eyes scanned around her but there was nothing. She sighed in dismay, cursing herself. It was right there. Right in front of her! A few moments later, Brownclaw appeared.

"Didn't get it?" Brownclaw said, raising his eyebrows. Willowpaw shook her head.

"It's alright," Brownclaw said. "It was your first time." Willowpaw shrugged. It was her first time.., but she was sure other apprentices would have caught it.

"go try again. don't get discouraged so soon," Brownclaw said. Willowpaw nodded.

"ok," she said, trying to cheer herself up. Taking a deep breath, she set off again. This time, it took her longer until she finally found prey. She heard it in front of her. The soft flap of wings. Then the peck of a beak on the ground. Willowpaw inched forward, her paws gently setting into the earth each time. Willowpaw finally pushed her face through a blade of grass and spotted it. It was a crow. It pecked at the ground, unaware of Willowpaw's eyes on it. Willowpaw froze. What if she missed it? She couldn't avoid another mistake. Brownclaw would be so disappointed. She was starting to panic, her mind going crazy. Then the crow cocked its head, as if it had finally realised Willowpaw's presence. *Just do it*, Willowpaw cried to herself. With a small shout, Willowpaw launched herself at the bird. It flapped its wings wildly, its feet scrambling to get away. Willowpaw felt one of its claw dig into her leg. There was the crazy sqwaking of the crow, almost scaring Willowpaw. Willowpaw, panicking herself, struggled wildly to sink her teeth into the bird. Finally, she caught its wing. It struggled wildly, its beak pecking her and the other wing hitting her madly. Willowpaw put her claw on the bird's head, digging her claws into its skull. It made an awful screeching noise then went limp. Willowpaw, breathing heavily, stumbled back, almost in shock. She couldn't believe she had done it. She grimaced, seeing the bird's limp and distorted body. Brownclaw appeared at her sigh and spotted the bird.

"You did it!" he cried. "Good job. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I just- I didn't think I would be able to do it," said Willowpaw. She turned away from the bird.

"you did great. I knew you could do it," assured Brownclaw. Willowpaw felt her whole body warm up. He knew she could do it. It made her feel slightly unbalanced. She wasn't used to cats saying positive things to her. She didn't say anything, not knowing how to react.

"Are you going to take the crow or not?" Brownclaw asked. "I think you deserve a rest. Bring it back to camp. Show your friends, family whatever, then you can eat it." Willowpaw nodded vigorously, taking the dead bird in her mouth delicately.

"We'll meet her in the afternoon, ok?" Brownclaw said.

"Sure, thanks," nodded Willowpaw. She trotted back towards camp. She wondered if Acornpaw would be in camp. But even if he was, what would she say to him? They weren't exactly on speaking terms. She huffed. As she slipped into camp, the crow clamped into her jaw, a few eyes landed on her. She felt herself swell with pride then immediately felt bad. Who was she, to think so highly of herself? how about Stormkit? Her eyes lighting up, Willowpaw rushed towards Mintspot who was sunning in the corner of the camp. As she approached Mintspot, she hesitated. What was she going to tell Mintspot?

"What?" Mintspot asked, looking up. Her eyes landed on the crow. "Is that for me?" Willowpaw paused but then nodded. She put the crow at her feet.

"Here," said Willowpaw. Mintspot took it, sniffing it judgingly.

"Why are you staring at me?" asked Mintspot. "What do you want?"

"I just- I caught that crow!" Willowpaw couldn't help but say. She was so proud. She wanted to tell somebody. Somebody that would encourage her and be just as excited for her.

"Mmm," huffed Mintspot, rolling her eyes. "Good for you." The unspoken words rang in the air.

"I erm-," Willowpaw didn't know what to say, she stood nervously before her mother.

"What do you wan huh?" Mintspot snapped. "Go on and be happy. As if everything is fine. Go and learn things and hunt things when your brother, is probably suffering with those

Twolegs." Willowpaw hung her head. She knew that it was selfish of her to be happy. Selfish for her to celebrate when her brother would not be able to do any of those things. She was used to the world revolving around Stormkit. It was normal to her. She was used to her mother being hostile and cold, she assumed it was because of the lost of Stormkit. She was used to her father . barely talking to her, because Mintspot didn't want it. She was used to the whole Clan being a bit distanced to her because she had no self confidence and was too shy to go up and talk to them. *I wish you would just come home, Stormkit*, begged Willowpaw. *Please, come home*. She didn't know what life with Stormkit would ever be like. She had never talked to Stormkit. But she was sure it would fix everything. Stormkit was the answer.

# Chapter 44

A high pitched yap. Rook jolted awake. He leapt to his feet, his eyes adjusting to the light. His nose smelt the strong, pungent smell of dog. There was another, loud, bone shattering bark. Rook located the dog, on one of the dirt roads. Without a second look back, Rook fled. He leapt over the small river and sprinted down the next field. He was wide awake. But as he ran, he heard the loud, thudding footsteps of something chasing him. The dog. Rook felt a brief surge of panic. He darted through the field, trying to find a place to hide. A place to climb. Anything. In the distance, Rook barely registered the sound of a human, calling to its dog.

"Mookie!" called the human angrily. "Mookie! Come back! Mookie." Rook didn't stop, he could hear the dog at his feet. Rook increased his pace. His feet barely touched the ground. He streaked through the field until finally, he was met with a tree trunk. Without a moment of hesitation, heart banging in his chest, Rook shot up the tree. He scrambled higher and higher. Mookie, the dog, kept barking below. Rook climbed to the top most branch. It was slightly flimsy. He looked down through the branches and leaves. The dog was truly terrifying. It had glistening black fur with two brown dots above its eyes. It had a docked tail. Muscles rippled under its sleek coat. It snapped up at Rook, eyes fixed on him. Mookie, the rottweiler, was the hunter. Rook was the prey. Mookie leapt up, his claws scratching at the bark. It jumped higher and higher, its teeth snapping upward. It had truly terrifying teeth. His teeth were sharp and accompanied by a powerful, deadly jaw. Each time, the dog seemed to jump higher. Rook was shaking. Suddenly, his foot slipped and the flimsy branch slipped form underneath him. Rook let out a small squeal of terror. He was falling. Falling through the air. He twisted around. Mookie let out a howl of triumph. Rook landed hard on his paws. He was disorientated but wasted no time. He ran in the first direction he landed in. He felt the dog's breath by his head. Then he was knocked to the ground. He tumbled backward, letting out a wail. He was going to die. The dog was going to tear him to shreds. The barking was incessant. Loud, angry, determined. Rook waited for the shark teeth to sink into his neck,

ending his life. He waited and waited. The barking continued. But Rook soon realised, although the dog was near and eager to kill him, the dog was unable to get to him. The owner had caught up with it and was holding it back by the collar. Rook rolled to his feet. He caught sight of the massive rottweiler and the young man holding it firmly by the collar, brow creased with sweat.

"No Mookie. Stop it. Leave it!" the man attempted to calm the rottewiler down to no avail. Rook shook himself and shot off. He heard the dog give out wails of frustration as Rook disappeared out of sight. When the barking finally stopped, Rook collapsed to the ground, panting hard. He couldn't believe it. What a great start to the morning. Rook wanted to curl back up and sleep but he didn't think he would be able to do that. He didn't think he would ever be able to sleep peacefully again. Rook licked the small scratch he had got from the fall then stretched. He padded towards a tree and climbed up. He scanned his surroundings. He had a few large fields to go before he reached the first few houses. He could do that. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Rook leapt down the tree and headed for the houses. He trotted at a quick pace, his ears and eyes sharp. Halfway towards the houses, walking down a corn field, Rook's stomach grumbled. Rook suddenly felt his hunger. It was desperate. He wanted food. Needed it now. Abandoning the sight of the houses, Rook instead turned his attention to hunting. He could hunt. Yes, he could hunt. He knew how to hunt. He had had hunting lessons. He could do this. Taking a deep breath, Rook padded slowly on the hunt for food. He was no longer the prey, he was the hunter. And he liked it much better this way. After fifteen minutes of prowling, Rook finally heard a scuttling sound. Rook froze. He located where the sound was from, deciding that it must be mouse. Then he slowly crept towards it. He breathed as quietly as possible. Then through the short blades of grass, Rook spotted the mouse. Without a moment of though, Rook shot his front paw out. He felt it collide with the mouse's light body. The mouse let out an alarmed squeak and tried to get back to its feet but Rook was faster. Rook drove his sharp teeth into the mouse. It went limp. Rook was overjoyed. He dropped to the ground and ate. He gobbled up the whole mouse, not wasting a single bit. Then he was off again, making his long tedious way towards the houses. The beginning of the journey to find his family.

# Chapter 45

Willowpaw was determined to learn everything she could from Brownclaw. She didn't care that her parents wouldn't appreciate it. She decided that she would do it for herself. One day, she would show her parents that she could do great. With or without Stormkit. Deep down, she knew that that was just a dream. A wish that would never come true. The Clan wanted Stormkit. Mintspot needed Stormkit. Even Willowpaw needed Stormkit. It wasn't a matter of life or death... well, maybe it was, in a way. It was just- Willowpaw knew Stormkit was the answer to everything. He was the reason she was not allowed to be happy. The reason Mintspot shunned her, why the whole Clan shunned her. Mintspot felt guilty to be happy when Stormkit might not be.

"What's on your mind?" asked a voice. It was Brownclaw. Willowpaw was somewhat relieved. She liked her mentor. She was glad that she didn't have to think about Stormkit anymore.

"Nothing," shrugged Willowpaw. "What are we going to learn today?"

"Nothing," answered Brownclaw.

"huh?" frowned Willowpaw, confused.

"Nothing until you tell me what's bothering you," Brownclaw clarified, his eyes round with care.

"I- nothing's bothering me!" exclaimed Willowpaw.

"Of course something's bothering you. It's written all over your face. I know that face. You made it all the time as a kit. You always looked so.... thoughtful and sad, if I may say so myself. Not to judge, of course," Brownclaw said.

"I'm not sad," replied Willowpaw, grimacing slightly.

"Maybe not. But something is bothering you. It's my job as a mentor to find out what," Brownclaw said. Willowpaw started to object but thought better of it.

"I was just thinking about Stormkit. I wish he was here," Willowpaw finally admitted.

"Yeah...," nodded Brownclaw, memories flooding back. "We all do. Especially Mintspot. Is that why you're always down?"

"Yeah. I mean no. It's just, it's to respect him you know.

Why should I be happy if Stormkit will never be?" Willowpaw explained. Brownclaw frowned at that. He thought for a moment.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"That's what Mintspot tells me. She's right, I guess. Sometimes I feel so selfish. Because I can't *help* but feel happy," sighed Willowpaw.

"that's- that's ridiculous," Brownclaw put plainly. "I don't know why Mintspot would say such a thing. You don't know what happened to Stormkit. he may be having the time of his life as a kittypet. He may be in StarClan. We don't know. But you shouldn't just wallow in sadness, pretending it's respecting Stormkit." Willowpaw didn't know what to say. She had been told not to be happy her whole life. And now, her mentor was saying it was a ridiculous notion.

"I don't mean to insult Mintspot," Brownclaw clarified gently. "I can't imagine what she's going through. But she shouldn't be making you be sad for your brother."

"It doesn't matter," Willowpaw shrugged. She wanted to get this conversation over with. She didn't want to say anymore. It might upset Mintspot.

"I was there, the night of your birth," Brownclaw said. "And... well maybe this story can wait till next time." Because Acornpaw and his mentor appeared. Sootwhisker smiled at them.

"Ready for training?" asked Sootwhisker.

"Huh?" Willowpaw frowned. Acornpaw kept quiet, not quite meeting Willowpaw's eyes. Brownclaw got up.

"I forgot to tell you. We're going to be training with Acornpaw and Sootwhisker today. How do you feel about that?" Brownclaw asked, looking at Willowpaw expectantly.

"Cool," was all Willowpaw could utter. She didn't know what she was going to do. She had been so mean to Acornpaw. Pushed him away. She wanted him more than ever. She wanted to tell him everything. But how could she fix what she had done? He probably never wanted to talk to her ever again. Brownclaw and Sootwhisker trotted in front, leading the two apprentices. Willowpaw and Acornpaw trailed behind, keeping their respective distanced.

"Why aren't you guys talking?" asked Sootwhisker, shooting them a questioning look. "Aren't you excited?" Brownclaw gazed at Willowpaw worriedly.

"Yeah. *So* excited," Willowpaw forced a grin.

"Totally," nodded Acornpaw. The two mentors chuckled then resumed their talk. Willowpaw's mind was reeling. What was she going to say? What was she going to do? She thought she was going to drown.

"Hey," Acornpaw finally said.

"H-hey," Willowpaw replied, stumbling slightly. Acornpaw cocked his head.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked.

"N-no! Are you mad at me?" Willowpaw asked back in a small voice. She knew the answer. Of course he was mad at her. She was probably the worst friend ever.

"Well. No," Acornpaw said. Willowpaw frowned and looked at him.

"What? Why?" she asked confusedly.

"I was mad at you at first," Acornpaw confessed. "But then, the more I thought about it, the more I knew it wasn't you. You were doing it for me. You didn't want me to be an outsider. But I don't mind. I don't mind being an outsider if it means I get to be with you." Willowpaw felt something flutter in her heart. She moved closer to Acornpaw.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm really sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it but... but why would you want to be friends with me over the other apprentices? Over your brother?"

"Cos you're my best friend!" cried Acornpaw as if it was obvious. "You're like the most kind and understanding cat ever." Willowpaw smiled.

"You're the nicest and funniest cat ever!" Willowpaw complimented back. It was so great to finally speak to Acornpaw. Everything seemed to flow freely. They complimented each other all the way till the training spot.

"What are you two lovebirds talking about?" teased Sootwhisker. Willowpaw and Acornpaw shot each other a confused look. What did he mean? Sootwhisker and Brownclaw burst into good natured laughter.

# Chapter 46

Rook finally reached the first house. It was a beautiful medium sized house with beige walls and vines and flowers growing along the side. The gate had a majestic arch above, with colourful flowers growing all over. The garden was well kept, with a small fountain in the middle. Rook squeezed under the fence. He didn't know why he was entering the garden. But somehow, the sight of a house. The smell of humans. It comforted him. He wasn't entirely alone. He sniffed at the ground, making sure no dog had been there. No smell of dog. Happily, he trotted to the back door. Beside it was a large window. He peered through it. Inside, was a round table with a white patterned cloth. A large flower vase stood in the middle of the table. There was a wooden shelf that looked quite complicated and ancient. Inside, there were nice cutlery, vases, plates and cups. Rook could not see anybody. He crept around the house, looking for a way in. He did a whole round and ended up at the back door once more. He sighed. Suddenly, a human appeared. Rook stood tense, not knowing what to expect. The human did not notice him. It was an old man. He had kind eyes and a slightly hunched back. He wore a nice light blue sweater and some beige pants. He walked into the living room then into another room, out of sight. He didn't look like a threat and although Rook had run away from his other humans, he ached to be with humans again. He didn't know why. So he meowed. He meowed as loud as he could, pressing up against the window. But of course, the old man did not hear him. He was, quite old after all. Just as Rook was about to give up, a rather young woman appeared. She had long wavy brown hair and as soon as she stepped into the living room, she spotted Rook. She called out to the old man then walked to the back door. She opened it. Rook leapt at her feet, purring as he rubbed himself against her. The woman seemed slightly surprised at first then smiled.

"Hello. Who are you?" she said, not really expecting an answer. Rook let himself inside. He trotted into the kitchen where the old man was. The kitchen was spacious with a white tiled floor. Garlic hung from the walls along with a few plants.

"Oh. The cat," smiled the old man.

"Yes. I'm sorry. He let himself in," the woman said, laughing slightly. "I'll bring him back out."

"Oh no. It's quite alright. He can stay," the old man said, waving away the woman's idea.

"Oh ok," nodded the woman.

"Are you hungry?" asked the man to Rook. Rook meowed in response. Although he had had the mouse, it had hardly been enough to feed him.

"Well, you guys seem to be fine," the woman noticed. "I'm going to go help Lily."

"Yes yes. You go do that," the old man nodded. He bustled around the kitchen quite slowly. Rook could see that his muscles hurt him. Then the man finally brought all the food to the table. He sat down with a sigh of relief then patted the chair beside him.

"Come here, what's your name?" the man said. Rook trotted up to the chair and bounded onto it.

"Rook," replied Rook.

"Oh there. You have a collar," smiled the man. He reached forward. Rook felt his fingers fumbling with something around his neck. He took a small metallic thing and narrowed his eyes to read it.

"Oh. I can't see it. It's- written so tiny...," the man sighed. "Well. I'll call you Stephen for now. He's my son, you know. He's much older. Got a family. Two little kids. And a dog. You wouldn't like the dog, I suppose."

"Ugh, I'd hate the dog," Rook said, wrinkling his nose. His eyes gazed to where the food was. The old man noticed.

"Ah, hungry," he laughed. "But first. Your collar seems to be quite uncomfortable." He reached over and his fingers found a clip. There was a click and the man took the collar off. Rook felt a relief in his neck. He shook himself. It felt great. His neck felt.... lighter. He rubbed his paw at the place his collar used to be. He could feel nothing but fur. He had forgotten about the collar as he had been so used to it. But it felt like ages since he had been free. Collarless.

"Here you go," the old man said. Rook had not noticed as the man had reached over the table and brought a small plate of biscuits to Rook. Rook gobbled them up gratefully. Then the man pushed a saucer of lukewarm milk to Rook, offering it to him.

"Thanks!" exclaimed Rook. Of course, the man did not

seem to hear. Rook drank the milk. It was soft and delicate in his mouth. There were footsteps and the woman along with another old woman, supposedly Lily, appeared. Rook stared at them. The old woman had her grey hair tied in a bun over her head. Her face was wrinkled but her eyes still shone. She wore a long flowery dress with a white cardigan. She moved much slower than the old man and was perched over a stick.

"Good morning Lily," the old man said, a smile brightening his face.

"Good morning Alfred," the old lady beamed back, bustling into the seat beside Alfred.

"Oh, the cat is still here," noticed the younger woman. Lily's eyes focused on Rook and it took her a moment to react, as if she were trying to figure out what he was.

"Oh. A cat!" she exclaimed.

"Oh yes. I was just feeding it a little. Doesn't he remind you of Stephen?" Alfred said in a soft voice.

"A little," nodded the old woman. The young lady smiled tightly and brushed some dust of a shelf, looking slightly restless.

"Would you like some tea with biscuits today?" asked the young woman.

"Yes, that would be very kind of you Anne," nodded Lily.

"Alright," nodded the young Anne. She marched into the kitchen with a sense of purpose.

"Are we going to keep the cat?" Lily asked Alfred, her gaze seemingly far away.

"I would like to. Stephen and the kids would like it. Although probably not their dog," Alfred replied. "But I am sure a beautiful cat like this has a family."

"Yes. That is true. We should get a cat," Lily said thoughtfully.

"We should," nodded Alfred just as thoughtfully. Rook didn't know what to make of the situation. He had to find his family.

"Here you go," Anne said, putting down a small white teacup and a plate of biscuits in front of Lily. "I need to prepare the rooms for Stephen and his family when they come but if you need anything, just call me." With that, Anne bustled out.

"Oh yes. They are coming to visit tomorrow," Alfred said, his eyes lighting up.

"Mmmm," agreed Lily, a twinkle in her eyes. "I wonder how much little Sophie has grown."

"She must be taller than us now," laughed Alfred. Rook slipped off the chair and trotted after Anne. Alfred and Lily did not seem to notice. He found Anne in a spacious room with a large four poster bed and flowery curtains and blankets. Anne was making the bed, muttering to herself. She spotted Rook and raised her eyes.

"Are you going to be staying here?" she asked him.

"I'm going to have to leave soon. I need to get back to my family," responded Rook.

"Come. I'll let you out," Anne sighed. She led Rook towards the front door where a small mat with the word welcome was swirled on. Anne opened the door and motioned outside. Rook cocked his head. He did not feel like leaving just yet, but the way Anne was playing with her hands and the look of irritation on her face made it clear. He leapt down the front steps and trotted down the garden. He spotted Anne in the window, returning to the bedroom. Without another glance back, Rook slipped through the fence and made his way toward the forest once more.

# Chapter 47

"Oh my gosh!" gasped Acornpaw, collapsing on the ground. "You're so fast."

"Thanks," grinned Willowpaw.

"Wow," grinned Acornpaw, shaking the grass of his fur. They had just raced across half of WindClan as their mentors had let them off early.

"Want to do it again?" suggested Willowpaw with a sly smile.

"Maybe tomorrow," huffed Acornpaw, rolling onto his back and staring at the blue sky.

"It's almost leaf-fall,"grinned Willowpaw.

"I know!" nodded Acornpaw. "I can't wait for leaf-bare. I really really really want to see snow!"

"Me too!" exclaimed Willowpaw. "Imagine just rolling around in snow."

"I know and it would be so nice and cold and everything will be white and I just can't wait!" agreed Acornpaw excitedly. Just then Snailpaw appeared. His eyes went from Acornpaw to Willowpaw.

"Want to play with us?" Snailpaw asked Acornpaw, ignoring Willowpaw. "We're going to see who can hunt the most prey. Whitepaw and Dovepaw are playing too."

"Sure," nodded Acornpaw then he turned to Willowpaw. "If you want to."

"I don't mind," shrugged Willowpaw, she looked down at her feet. She knew that Dovepaw, whitepaw and Snailpaw didn't want her. "It's ok. You can go alone."

"Nah come on. If you don't want to, I won't either," said Acornpaw.

"If it wasn't clear before, I'm only asking you, Acornpaw," Snailpaw pointed out, rolling his eyes at his brother. "Are you coming or not? Dovepaw and Whitepaw aren't going to wait around all day."

"It's ok then. I'm not playing with you if you're not letting Willowpaw join too," Acornpaw said, puffing out his chest

indignantly. Willowpaw didn't need his protection. She burnt with embarrassment. She knew Acornpaw hated turning down a challenge but he was doing it for her. Somehow, she felt as if it wasn't right. Why would he chose her over Dovepaw, Whitepaw and his own brother? How could he still be her friend if she held him back?

"Go with them. I was going to go back to camp anyways," Willowpaw urged Acornpaw.

"Nah. It's fine. We can have our own competition. Race you to the otherside?" asked Acornpaw. Willowpaw looked at him to see if he was serious. His eyes were twinkling and he had a mischievous smile that made Willowpaw's stomach flip. She couldn't help but smile.

"You're on!" she grinned but before she could count, Acornpaw was off. He shot off into the tall grasses and was gone. Willowpaw bounded after him, her feet barely touching the ground. She was nimble, swift and extremely fast. The wind whipped past her and tickled her nose. Her muscles tensed, pushing her forward, faster and faster. She was free. She could run like that forever. Finally, she reached the other side of the field and halted, her chest heaving and her eyes gleaming. A few moments later, Acornpaw tumbled to the ground, breathing heavily.

"Oh great StarClan," he gasped. Willowpaw giggled a bit.

"I'll let you win next time," Willowpaw said with a smile. After a break, they set off for camp where their mentors announced that the Gathering was going to take place that night.

"Are we going!?" cried Acornpaw with excitement. Willowpaw wanted to jump up and scream. A Gathering! Wow! That sounded awesome.

"Yes. You are both coming. But you must behave yourselves," warned Acornpaw's mentor. Willowpaw and Acornpaw nodded quickly. Of course they would behave. Acornpaw couldn't wait to finally attend a Gathering with Willowpaw. The rest of the afternoon was spent talking excitedly about the Gathering to come.

Willowpaw stood on the cold ground, feeling the night breeze on her pelt. Crickets chirped and owls hooted. Acornpaw stood beside her, buzzing with excitement. Their mentors, Sootwhisker and Brownclaw, were talking to each other in low voices as they awaited the last few warriors and Gorsestar. Snailpaw, Whitepaw

and Dovepaw were not going to the Gathering which made Willowpaw feel much better. Doestripe and Troutfur were conversing together, glancing at the camp entrance with growing impatience. Coming along to the Gathering as well were Spottedcall, Fernspring and Halestorm. Finally, Gorsestar, Ravenstripe and Moosetail appeared. Gorsestar flicked his tail.

"Sorry for the delay," he said in a gruff voice and led the group of cats toward the four trees. Acornpaw glanced at Willowpaw, unable to contain his enthusiasm. His eyes were glowing. Willowpaw shared his emotions. Together, the group of cats started to run. They were swift and silent, their paws barely making a sound as they flew through the grass. Finally, Willowpaw smelt many different and new smells and heard commotion. She couldn't believe it. She was at a Gathering.

"Great StarClan!" she muttered under her breath, her eyes lighting up. Gorsestar turned to check on his Clanmates then padded out of the cover of the grasses. Brownclaw turned to Willowpaw.

"Don't stray too far. Reveal as little as possible. And have fun," Brownclaw told Willowpaw. She nodded enthusiastically. She followed him and stood in the middle of a clearing where four large trees stood majestically, casting dancing shadows. The other side of the clearing was lit up by the bright round moon in the sky and a large rock sat there. Like shadows, cats mingled around the clearing. The smells of ThunderClan, RiverClan, ShadowClan and Willowpaw's own Clan was a strong mixture in the air. Murmurs of conversations and laughs dotted the clearing. Willowpaw's heart leapt. She saw that to each Clan had chosen a side and most of them remained chatting in low voices with their own Clanmates but some cats had run to meet others and to socialise. Acornpaw stood beside Willowpaw, taking it all in. Gorsestar and Doestripe headed for the rock while Troutfur made a beeline for a fluffy snow white cat. They greeted each other warmly.

"whos that?" asked Willowpaw, motioning to the cat Troutfur was talking to.

"I don't know," shrugged Acornpaw.

"That's our medicine cat," a voice came from behind them. Willowpaw almost jumped. She turned around and came face to face with a sleek golden brown tom. He looked young. "Her name is Laurelstep."

"And what's your name?" responded Acornpaw, tensing up a little, afterall it was their first time meeting and talking to a cat from another Clan. Willowpaw found herself feeling slightly cold toward the apprentice. The strong scent wafting from him reminded Willowpaw of RiverClan.

"Are you RiverClan?" asked Willowpaw.

"I'm Brackenpaw," grinned the apprentice, flashing them a smile. "And I am indeed from RiverClan. What's your name?" Brackenpaw was looking straight at Willowpaw. She was caught off guard. She never was one to socialise. her mother had always told her to keep to herself. She didn't know what to say. She wanted to shrink away into the shadows and hide. She wanted to be at the Gathering but she didn't want to talk to anyone. She just wanted to be there, to watch and to witness. Acornpaw stepped up for her.

"Her name is Willowpaw. She doesn't talk to RiverClan cats," answered Acornpaw.

"Ok," chuckled Brackenpaw with a shrug. "How about you macho tom?" Acornpaw frowned.

"I'm Acornpaw," he said.

"Oh, are you Snailpaw's brother?" asked Brackenpaw, his eyes lighting up with recognition. "He's great. You're not- you're not like him."

"No. I'm not," huffed Acornpaw.

"Right. Right," Brackenpaw said then spotted a cat in the crowd. "Hey! Smokepaw! Come here!" A smokey grey tom with dark sunken eyes trotted towards them. His fur was messy and unkept.

"What is it?" he asked. "I was talking to Steampaw. She's finally stopped ignoring me," huffed Smokepaw.

"For the last time, she doesn't like you," Brackenpaw said, giving his friend a pointed look. "She likes Rootwhisker."

"But he doesn't like her!" exclaimed Smokepaw. Willowpaw was intrigued by this. She had never thought of the other cats in other Clans similar to the cats in her Clan but they did seem the same. They had crushes and they had best friends and they even had arguements.

"Come on. He obviously does. They're just waiting for her to become a warrior," Brackenpaw said then sighed. "Anyways look. This is Acornpaw. He's Snailpaw's brother." Smokepaw's eyes scanned Acornpaw, he did not look impressed.

"I thought you'd be more like your brother," he said then

his eyes went to Willowpaw and he grinned a little. "And who are you?" Willowpaw felt uncomfortable once more. She didn't like the way he looked at her, his eyes taunting. Once again, she wanted to hide in the shadows.

"The Gathering has begun!" yowled a cat. Smokepaw and Brackenpaw darted back to their Clan. Brownclaw appeared beside Willowpaw and Acornpaw.

"Come on," he said, leading them under the shadow of a huge tree where the rest of WindClan was nestled. Willowpaw sat down beside Acornpaw, her eyes glued to the four dark shapes standing proudly on the rock. Gorsestar stood there, looking down at the other Clans, his eyes calculative. His tail twitched slightly. Beside him, a flaming orange cat stood, eyes lit by the moon, glowing green. He looked majestic, like a real king. Willowpaw wondered who he was.

"That's Blazestar. He's the ThunderClan warrior," Acornpaw whispered in Willowpaw's ear, as if reading her thoughts. A she-cat, sleek with a coat as dark as night and flaring eyes stood beside Blazestar. They contrasted each other, whit Blazestar's proud gaze and her dark piercing eyes. She seemed to be watching every cat in the clearing.

"Who's she?" asked Willowpaw, thrills running down her spine.

"That's Batstar. She's the leader of ShadowClan," shuddered Acornpaw. The last cat, RiverClan's leader, was a she cat with gentle blue eyes and a well groomed stripped light grey coat.

"What's her name?" asked Willowpaw.

"Who?" asked Acornpaw.

"RiverClan's leader," replied Willowpaw.

"Wildstar."

"ThunderClan, is thriving. Although leaf-fall is quickly approaching, we have plenty of food and our *training* is going extremely well. We are proud to announce two new kits, Pricklekit and Plumkit. They are healthy and strong. Both kits of Sprucefern and Frognose," Blazestar declared, his voice ringing out far beyond the Clearing. ThunderClan cheered and hollered, making Willowpaw jumped slightly. A few cats from other Clans joined in slightly less enthusiastically. Blazestar took a step back but his coat still burned bright and it was hard to take his eyes off him.

"ShadowClan, is stronger than ever. We are not afraid that leaf-bare is approaching. We have a new medicine cat apprentice, Sloepaw and a warrior apprentice Blossompaw. ThunderClan, attempted to cross our borders and steal prey from our border. Of course, our warriors were more than capable of chasing them back to their side. Hopefully, they'll know not to cross the boundaries next time," Batstar announced, her voice like silk laced with poison. Blazestar glared at her and he tensed. Willowpaw held her breath. She could feel all the Clans, staring up at the rock, either accusingly or in anticipation. Finally, Blazestar smiled a little but his glowing green eyes remained cold.

"Mmm. Yes, it was a small misunderstanding. I hope your warriors recover from it," Blaze star answered. Batstar showed her fangs, they were white and sharp but she did not make a move for the ThunderClan leader.

"Right," interrupted Wildstar. "RiverClan, I am glad to announce, is doing just as great. We have good food, the fish are plenty this year! And we've had the best weather. I'd like to also announce some great news! Burredge has become a warrior!" RiverClan leapt up, yelling out Burredge on repeat. Willowpaw tilted her head. Finally, it was Gorsestar's turn. He was older than the other leaders but he held wisdom in his eyes and all the Clans respected him. As soon as he stepped forward, silence reigned in the Clearing. Gorsestar's light brown pelt was lit up perfectly by the moon, making his eyes shine.

"WindClan is glad to hear such great news from all the other Clans," Gorsestar begun. Willowpaw watched proudly. That was her Clan leader. Acornpaw was smiling slightly. "We do not have any new kits or warriors but I am happy to announce that we are healthy, strong and booming. StarClan is on our side."

# Chapter 48

The night was pitch black. Rook was snuggled under the cover of a berry bush but he could not sleep. Cold wind whipped outside, making wailing noises and the hoots of owl chilled Rook to the bone. Suddenly, not very far away, he heard some rustling. Like a dog was making its way towards Rook. Rook cringed and pricked his ears. He did not want another encounter with a dog. He sniffed, trying to identify the creature making its way nearer but all he could smell was the strong scent of an upcoming storm. Suddenly, a large shape appeared. Rook shot up and hissed, unsheathing his claws.

"What you doing that for?" a gruff voice asked. Rook stopped in his tracks, brows furrowing.

"W-what?" he stammered. He couldn't believe it, the voice was surprisingly familiar and Rook knew exactly who it was in an instant. He padded closer. "Don, is that you?"

"Yes. Who else did you think it was?" Don asked in a rather matter of fact tone. Rook stepped aside and let Don slip into the cover of the bush with him.

"What are you doing here?" asked Rook, completely bewildered.

"Left my human. Well, he's not exactly my human. I'd say more of a housemate," Don answered, settling down. Rook was too surprised to lay back down.

"Why did you leave?" he asked.

"Well. Firstly, you left without even telling me," Don accused.

"I-I'm sorry," Rook said. "I-" Forgot....

"You know, we were both getting sick of each other. It's for the best. I'm free now," Don grumbled.

"Oh," Rook said.

"Now, what are *you* doing out here?" Don questioned. "Aren't you supposed to be snuggled up with a new family?"

"Not exactly. I mean, I should be. But I'm going to find Safanah. I need to. She's my real family," Rook explained. Don raised his eyebrows skeptically.

"You're going to search for them?" he asked. "How in the world...?"

"I don't know but I know I won't stop until I find them," Rook said determinedly.

"I'm glad you love them that much but eh..., it's going to be impossible," Don said.

"What do you mean?" Rook asked, frowning. "I don't care how long it takes."

"They could be anywhere. They could be on the other side of the planet!" Don exclaimed.

"Other side of the planet?" Rook echoed. "What's that?"

"Ahhh. So young and naive. What it is is bloody far," Don cried. "You ain't ever going to find them."

"Don't say that! I know I will," Rook snapped back defensively. How dare he say that? He was going to find his family, no matter what it took.

"Mmm. Ok ok. Whatever you say. Anyways, I'll help you," Don suggested. "Are you headed for the forest?"

"Yeah," nodded Rook.

"Why?" Don said with a disappointed sigh.

"I feel like I might find some answers there," Rook shrugged.

"Hmm. Well. I'll follow you till there, although I'm going to be taking another route to get past it. There's a huge town after the forest. I'm hoping to find a nice rubbish bin and live there luxuriously for my whole life. Provided I live long enough to get there," Don grinned.

"That's not funny," Rook rolled his eyes. "Of course you'll make it."

"Ha don't underestimate my age," laughed Don.

"So you'll come with me?" Rook asked. As much as it pained him to admit it, he liked some company, especially if it was Don. Don did have a dark sense of humour but he knew what he was doing and he would be of great help. It also had an added bonus of Rook not talking to himself anymore.

"Yes. I will," nodded Don. "Or, in other words, you're going to come with me." Rook made a face.

"Do you know how to hunt?" he asked just as his stomach grumbled.

"As well as a warrior," grinned Don. A memory sparked in

Rook's head but he didn't say anything.

"Right," he said.

"We leave at dawn?" Don smiled.

"Hmm. Alright," nodded Ron. It was early but it meant they would make faster progress. He settled down finally and curled up into a ball. Having Don with him gave him a sense of safety. His mind drifted into a calm, restless dream.

# Chapter 49

Willowpaw was curled up in the apprentice den, eyes closed firmly. Nobody else was there. Far off, she could hear the chattering of cats in the camp. Brownclaw had let Willowpaw sleep in as he wanted to train that night. Willowpaw had never known they could train at night but Brownclaw had assured her that it would prepare her for any scenario. Willowpaw had thought a nice day off would be great but now she was more lonely than ever. Mintspot was in camp but she was always chatting with another cat and Willowpaw did not want to anger or disrupt her. Willowpaw shifted in her nest and let out a small sigh.

"How was the Gathering?" a familiar voice asked. Willowpaw didn't look up. For a moment, she thought it was her imagination. Finally, she lifted her head up and saw Beetlejaw standing at the den entrance.

"B-Beetlejaw?" she said, almost in bewilderment. Beetlejaw smiled sadly. He padded into the den and sat down awkwardly in front of Willowpaw's nest. Willowpaw quickly sat up. Her father had come to see her. She didn't show it but her whole body was buzzing with excitement. Fireworks sparked in her head. Whatever she did, she could not make Beetlejaw mad at her. She could not ruin this moment.

"It was your first Gathering last night," Beetlejaw said, he chose his words carefully but the way he looked at Willowpaw.., with love and longing said more than words. He might not be able to form the words "i love you" and he did not, for some reason, show Willowpaw the love she deserved but at least he tried. Willowpaw had thought that her parents hadn't even known she had left camp. When she had gotten back, she had been bursting to tell them all about it but she found that they were nowhere to be seen. She had assumed they hadn't even noticed she had left in the first place.

"It- it was amazing," Willowpaw said, trying to form her sentences. It was as if she were unable to speak properly, bursting with excitement and nervousness.

"Did you see all the Clan leaders? Did you meet other

apprentices?" Beetelejaw seemed just as eager to learn about the Gathering as Willowpaw was to talk to him.

"Yeah! I saw Blazestar. And Wildstar. She seems quite nice and kind. Oh and Batstar, she has really dark eyes," Willowpaw said then looked up to see Beetlejaw's reaction, if he thought she was speaking too much or too little or if she was saying the right things. Beetlejaw smiled in reply which urged Willowpaw on.

"And I got to talk... meet some RiverClan apprentices. Their names were Brackenpaw and Smokepaw," continued Willowpaw.

"That's nice," nodded Beetlejaw. "It's good to make friends but remember, don't get too close." Willowpaw nodded eagerly. She'd do anything for him to be able to talk her like this again. For him to spend time with her. To pay attention to her.

"Beetlejaw," came a voice. Mintspot. Willowpaw tilted her head. In a blink, Beetlejaw's face turned serious once more, he got up and gave Willowpaw a nod.

"Good talking to you. Learn well and listen to your mentor," Beetlejaw said, trotting out of the den. Willowpaw frowned, wondering what she had done wrong. She padded after him and peered out of the den. Mintspot was there and Beetlejaw joined her. Mintspot had the far off, sad look in her eyes as always. Beetlejaw licked her gently and lovingly on the nose and whispered something in her ear. She gave him a brief nod and limped off. Willowpaw could not help but stare at her leg. It was long, ugly and deformed. It dragged lamely behind her, weighing her down. Willowpaw wondered, for the thousandth time, how exactly Mintspot had become like that. She wondered if Mintspot had been so distressed and sad before. She wondered if Mintspot used to laugh, joke, play. She imagined, for the millionth time what their family would be like, if she and her brother had been born safely in the nursery. She imagined a beautiful, twin brother. His eyes bright with life, his tail twitching happily. She imagined herself hurling into him and them rolling around in the dust, laughing hysterically. She imagined Stormkit, Acornkit and her, racing across the camp, stumbling over each other. Mintspot would watch them, a bright and happy glint in her eyes.

"Be careful!" she would yell. "Stormkit, be good to your sister!" And then when they would return to the nursery, Mintspot would settle down, let Willowkit and her brother snuggle up against

her and she would lick her warmly, whispering in her ear that everything would be alright. Then after a long day of warrior work, Beetlejaw would burst into the nursery and Willowkit and Stormkit would hurl themselves at him and bite his tail and his eyes would glow with love and pride. He would then walk up to Mintspot and lick her on the head and tell her he missed her and the kits.

"How was your day?" he would ask.

"Great. Willowkit managed to win a wrestling match against Acornkit and won all the races," Mintspot would report with a broad smile.

"I'm so proud of you," Beetlejaw would tell Willowkit. They would be one whole, perfect family.

"Willowpaw!" a voice snapped Willowpaw back to the present. She blinked and her eyes focused on Beetlejaw's face. Her mouth formed a small smile. Maybe he was back.

"Stop it," Beetlejaw snapped, his eyes flaring with anger and annoyance. Willowpaw's smile and hope was gone, destroyed in a split second. Her eyes welled up with tears and she hung her head.

"Why are you staring at Mintspot like that?" Beetlejaw muttered under his breath. "You know she doesn't like it. Now she's going to be in a mood for the whole day. Don't even bother talking to her. Or me." With that, Beetlejaw swivelled around and trotted back to Mintspot's side. Mintspot didn't even glance at Willowpaw. She leaned on Beetlejaw and he led her away. Willowpaw bit her tongue and padded back, tail down into the apprentice den. She hadn't realised that she had been staring at Mintspot. Her mind had been somewhere else completely. Somewhere happy. Somewhere safe. Somewhere which was not, and never would be reality.

# Chapter 50

Rook blinked his eyes open. The air was damp and mist floated around like a thin blanket of clouds. Rook stretched and yawned. He pricked his ears and looked around for Don. He slipped out from under the bush but could not see Don. Rook frowned. Then a shape appeared, trotting towards Ron.

"Morning sleepyhead," Don said, his mouth full. In it was clamped a large pigeon.

"Good morning," Rook said, impressed.

"Nice catch, right?" grinned Don. He put down the bird. "Eat it."

"How 'bout you?" asked Rook, licking his lips. His stomach grumbled for breakfast.

"I've already eaten a mouse," Don said. "Eat it quickly and let's go." Rook nodded. The ground was cold as he settled down and sunk his teeth into the pigeon. The morning ground was covered in dew and Rook puffed out his fur to fight off the chills running through his body. It was getting colder and colder. Soon, it would be autumn and then winter. Rook hoped he would find his family before winter. He didn't know how they would survive in the harsh weathers of winter.

"Done yet?" sighed Don, licking his paw.

"Almost," Rook assured Don, his mouth full. He gobbled down the rest of the pigeon and got up. Shaking himself, he nodded to Don.

"Let's go," he said. Don nodded and got up.

"Which direction?" Don asked.

"Uh," Rook cringed. He looked around, he could not see far enough. "I don't- I don't know..."

"It's alright kid," Don said with a small smirk. "I know where we are. Follow me." Don trotted off into the mist and Rook rushed after him. Rook followed Don in silence and managed to cover a lot of ground. As the afternoon came, Rook felt his legs burning and his whole body ached to lie down. The mist had finally lifted and Rook could see the forest in the distance once more. As they made their way down a grassy hill, the rushing of water

reached Rook's ears. He pricked them and hurried down past Don. He reached a small creek with clear trickling water. With a small smile, Rook bent down and started lapping at the water thirstily. Don was by his side a moment later, doing the same. When they were done, Rook sat down and let himself catch his breath.

"Time for a break?" asked Don. Rook's stomach rumbled in response. "Hungry already?"

"I'll hunt this time," Rook told Don. He didn't want Don to think that Rook could not do anything. He would contribute just as much as Don. Don shrugged.

"Sure kid. Be back before dark though," Don said, settling down in the cover of the grasses. Rook nodded.

"Of course. We could still cover a bit more ground," Rook said. "It's a break. Not an overnight stop."

"I think it'll be better if its an overnight stop," Don disagreed. "Look ahead. There are only large fields left to go. Imagine camping there. No water. Let's stay here and tomorrow we'll cover all those fields and we'll reach the tip of the forest."

"Ok. If you say so," sighed Rook.

"Yes I do. Now go hunt," Don ordered. Rook rolled his eyes but set off. As Rook made his way through the grasses, his mind wandered. He thought about his parents and perhaps, a sibling. Maybe a sister. He wondered what they were doing. If they were alive. If they missed him. He didn't miss them especially. He had never met them. Although.., he did wish he had a sibling. Somebody to share all his secrets to, to grow up with, to play with, to do everything with. A cat that would have his back no matter what. Shaking the thoughts from his head, Rook concentrated on his surroundings. Not far off, he heard the flutter of wings and a moment later, he spotted a bird flying away. Letting the bird go, Rook crouched down. He felt a slight movement in the ground. Rook pricked his ear towards where he thought it was coming from, his tail low and still. There was a short scuffle. Rook crept forward, keeping his shoulders and head low. The grasses pushed against his face. Finally, he felt the presence of prey in front of him. Rook was not sure whether it was a mouse or vole. He did not care. Taking a deep breath, he burst through the grass and swept his unsheathed paw out to where he had sensed he creature. There was a mild squeak and out of the corner of his eye, Rook spotted a blur of brown. In an instant, the vole had gone. Rook cursed himself and

spat on the ground. He continued his hunt.

Rook padded to Don, his tail down and feeling extremely exhausted. He did not know how Don had managed to hunt a pigeon and a mouse in the early morning. Clamped in Rook's mouth was a measly mouse that had already been injured. Don was curled up and looked up when Rook settled down beside him. Don raised his eyebrows.

"Tell me that's not all you got. You've been out for so long," Don grumbled. It was true. Rook hadn't noticed, but the sun had set and stars sprinkled the sky.

"Don't," Rook huffed. "I don't want to talk about. We can share." Don gave a low laugh:

"That'll barely be enough for you," he pointed out. "Anyways, when you didn't come back after an hour, I went hunting myself. Got myself a nice plump squirrel." Rook gave a low groan. He could almost imagine the squishy fat squirrel.

"And I got you this," added Don, pushing forward a fat vole. Rook's heart leaped.

"Thank you!" he exclaimed, pouncing on the vole. He gobbled it up hungrily then looked down at the mouse.

"Do you want it?" he asked Don. Don shook his head.

"I'm full," Don said with a satisfied smile. "Go ahead." Rook ate it, it was not very good, it tasted sickly and stale.

"Thanks," Rook said, curling up into a ball beside Don.

"No problem kid. Tomorrow, I'll teach you how to hunt if you want. When I'm gone, you're gonna have to hunt," Don mumbled sleepily.

"Don't say that," muttered Rook.

"I am going to be gone one day," Don retorted. Rook opened an eye and saw Don smiling in the dark.

"Not a day soon though," Rook replied.

"Hmph. I am old," Don assured.

# Chapter 51

"Come on, come at me!" Brownclaw urged. Willowpaw crouched and lashed out her front paw. It hit Brownclaw on the side but he did not move. He raised an eyebrow.

"You can do better than that," he told her. "Try a paw strike." Willowpaw nodded. She repeated the move in her head then lashed out her paw quickly at Brownclaw's head. He blinked and nodded.

"Better," he said with an approving nod. "You need to bring it down faster and harder. *Much* harder and faster. And aim for this side of my head." Brownclaw motioned to the side of his head, right behind his ear.

"Ok," nodded Willowpaw. She didn't want to do it too hard though. She didn't want to hurt Brownclaw although it seemed nothing she did could hurt him.

"Right. Let's just do fight. Let's say I'm a RiverClan cat ok? Use all the moves we've learnt so far," Brownclaw said. "Ok?"

"Yeah," nodded Willowpaw. She could do that. With that, Brownclaw lunged forward, aiming to trip Willowpaw. Swiftly, Willowpaw dodged and found herself behind Brownclaw. Brownclaw stumbled, spinning around quickly before Willowpaw could attack.

"You've got to be faster when attacking," Browclaw told her. "You're very good at dodging. You ended up behind me! That's perfect, you could have attacked me from there. Don't hesitate, alright? You're not going to hurt me. And you're not going to hurt yourself. It's just practise. Imagine being in a real fight. You really need to try. Come on." Willowpaw nodded once more. Taking a deep breath, she went for a belly rake. She had learnt the move the day before with Brownclaw. She had not mastered it yet and she was having trouble understanding the move but she tried it anyways. She slide under Brownclaw and struck at his unprotected belly. With ease, Brownclaw pinned her down.

"What do you do now?" he demanded. Willowpaw raked her brain for how to escape but she could not come up with anything.

"I don't know!" she cried.

"Use your back legs and claw at my stomach!" Brownclaw ordered. Willowpaw struggled and managed to rake her sheathed claws on Brownclaw's stomach. With a nod of approval, he stopped aside and swiped his paw forward. It hit Willowpaw on the head and she stumbled back dizzily.

"Oww," she mumbled.

"Come on Willowpaw. Come on!" Brownclaw encouraged.

"Ok ok ok," Willowpaw muttered to herself. "I can do it." Willowpaw straightened herself and in quick move, she was by Brownclaw's side and had sunk her teeth into his tail. He spun around and lashed out his back legs in an explosive movement. Willowpaw recognised it as a back kick. He had showed it to her before but he had decided she wasn't ready for it. With a squeak, Willowpaw let go of Brownclaw's tail to get out of his way. Brownclaw sighed and stared at her for a minute.

"Well. You're improving," he told her slowly. Willowpaw looked down, disappointed. What would her parents think? They already thought she was a disappointment. She was sure Stormkit would be much better at it then her.

"Hey, don't be disappointed," Brownclaw told her. "Look. You've got strengths and weaknesses. For one, your the fastest cat I've ever seen. If you used that for fighting then..., you'd be unbeatable. And you're very good at hunting!" Willowpaw nodded numbly.

"thanks," she said although she knew he was only trying to make feel better.

"We'll do more fighting tomorrow. Let's do some hunting now, right?" Brownclaw smiled at her expectantly. Willowpaw smiled back.

Willowpaw returned into camp, a squirrel and a crow clamped in her mouth. She trotted proudly to the fresh kill pile and dumped the prey there. Ravenstripe gave her an approving look. Willowpaw suddenly felt embarrassed and looked down. She slunk away. Just then, Brownclaw called her over. He was resting underneath the shade of a tree.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Not so disappointed about today's fighting lesson, are you?"

"No..," Willowpaw lied.

"Sit," he told her.

"Ok..," Willowpaw sat down beside Brownclaw. He looked at her, his eyes piercing into her. Willowpaw looked away.

"Tell me, why are you so shy?" asked Brownclaw.

"I.. er-" Willowpaw frowned. She stared at her paws in embarrassment. She didn't know why she was so shy. Why she couldn't stand any attention. She just felt as if she didn't deserve it. Mintspot certainly didn't think she was good enough to be paid attention to.

"Is it because of Mintspot?" Brownclaw questioned. Willowpaw didn't answer.

"I.., no," she frowned. "I don't..., I'm sorry."

"don't be sorry. I know it's because of Mintspot, you know. She's not been helping your self confidence, has she? She doesn't hate you, you know," Brownclaw told her. Willowpaw shrugged.

"Do you know what happened that night?" Brownclaw asked.

"Yeah," Willowpaw nodded.

"You only know Mintspot's version though, don't you?" Brownclaw pointed out. "Let me tell you what really happened. Maybe your mind will change a bit. Maybe you'll realise that Mintspot does love you. You don't have to be so- I don't know how to say it but..., you don't have to think that everything you do will disappoint her. She is not disappointed in you. She's just..., sad and... broken." Willowpaw didn't know what to say. She just kept quiet but she was listening attentively now.

"That night. When she had Stormkit and you, well, they weren't the best of circumstances. After she gave birth to Stormkit..., the tree was struck by lightning. But she could not move. You were still coming out. So just as you finally came out, the tree came crashing down. That's how her leg was rendered useless. Anyways, as we fled, she looked at you, both of you and I can assure you, she gazed at both of you with so much love...," Brownclaw seemed lost in his thoughts. Willowpaw was, also lost in her own, dangerous mind. The dark, sickening truth crashed down on her. She was the reason why Mintspot had lost the use of her leg. Mintspot was not sad for no reason. And she wasn't cold to Willowpaw for no reason either. Willowpaw had made given her a limp forever. Willowpaw took quick breaths, her vision clouded.

"Willowpaw. Willowpaw. Willowpaw, are you ok?" Brownclaw's voice seemed so far away. Willowpaw breathed heavily. She had destroyed Mintspot's world. In many ways. Too many ways. Why did she have to ruin everything? Why did she have to be such a burden? She was nothing to the Clan. She was a curse.

"I did it... it's all my fault," Willowpaw meowed, heartbroken.

"Wilowpaw, what do you mean?" Brownclaw's voice seemed so far away. Like he was not in the same world. Like they were kilometres apart. With a terrible howl, Willowpaw shot off.

"Willowpaw!" Brownclaw's voice was sharp and loud, strung with concern, sadness and guilt but it didn't register in Willowpaw's head. She shot out of camp and she was running. She was running through the long grasses. She was running and running. Her feet barely touched the ground. Wind whipped around her but it seemed to be pushing her forward, lifting her up, urging her to go faster. It howled in her ears, "You did it. It's all your fault. It's your fault. It's all your fault". Willowpaw ran faster and faster. Her whole body was on fire. She ran faster, to outrun the thoughts, the guilt..., the wind.

# Chapter 52

Rook and Don trotted towards the road where they could hear some cars rushing past.

"We'll find shelter there and tomorrow. We can enter the forest. Well, you can," Don said. "I'm not going in there."

"Alright," nodded Ron. They finally reached the road. Beyond the road was a small quaint village with short stone walls as fences and wooden houses. Rook glanced back at the forest, he wanted to go there so badly. They were so near. He was sure he would find his family after that. Somehow, his answers lay in the forest.

"Right, no cars, let's go," Don announced, flicking his tail then looked back, realising Rook wasn't listening.

"Roooooook," called Don.

"Sorry," Rook tore his gaze away from the forest.

"Let's go," Don said. They crossed the road. In the sky, ribbons of red and orange danced. They reached the first house and Don searched for a place to stay. Finally, he led Rook to the garage. There was a small opening and they entered. The garage was packed. There was a car and all kinds of junk laying around. Shelves were full with all kinds of things. Don found a corner with a fluffy jacket and curled on it. Rook searched for another spot. He was glad for good cover and found some old blankets. He curled up underneath it. It was warm and comforting. Outside, night was slowing descending. Rook pricked his ears as he heard the trickle of rain outside. He was glad for the shelter. He felt safe. He would sleep well that night.

"Good night," mumbled Rook sleepily.

"Good night," replied Don.

Rook sprung up, his eyes sharp, his body rigid. He could sense the danger. Something was not right. His eyes adjusted to the night. The garage seemed deadly still. He tensed as he sense movement beside him. He almost let out a cry of relief as he saw it was only Don. Don stood rigid beside Rook and motioned with his tail for Rook to creep around the car towards the exit. There was

something in the garage. Something that wanted to kill them. Rook felt chills of fear running along his spine. He had never felt such fear, it froze him to the bone. An unseen danger, stalking, watching them. Slowly, Rook stepped forward, his paw silently touching the cold ground. His tail low, eyes and ears sharp, Rook managed to make it to the other side of the car without a noise. Don was next. The sharp stink of the creature in the garage wafted to Rook's nose. He wrinkled it. He had never smelt anything like it. He imagined a large, dog like creature with red eyes and fur and sharp and long fangs. Crouching down, Rook peered under the car. He saw it. On the otherside of the car, four long and slender legs stood dangerously. A large tail accompanied it. Rook could not see the creature's head. Don reached Rook's side and nodded once more to the exit, urging Rook on. Gulping, Rook moved forward, they were getting nearer to the exit, and the creature. Rook didn't know if the creature knew they were in the garage with it but he hoped it didn't. Rook had almost managed to get to the exit when he heard a deep deadly growl. Rook slowly looked up, his fur standing up. His whole body frozen with fear. He laid his eyes on a large, slender shape. It had long, dark fur and a bushy tail. Muscles rippled under its blazing fur. But what caught Rook's eye was its head. It had a long muscle with a sharp nose and large, sharp ears. Its mouth was curled up into an ugly grin. It had the sharpest fangs, laced with death. Its eyes were dark and black, locked onto Rook. Rook gulped. The creature stepped forward. Something flashed in Rook's mind. At least he could think a little. Fox. This was a fox. It was much bigger, much larger, much scarier than he had ever thought anything could be. The fox let out another deep, blood curling growl and tensed up. Rook knew it was about to make its move. He closed his eyes, ready for the end. Suddenly, there was a loud shriek and Rook almost fell back. He clenched his eyes shut and shrunk back. He could almost feel the cold teeth sinking into his flesh. There were some loud scuffling sounds, crashing noises, clanking, another shriek and a vicious snarl.

"Open your eyes and get the hell out of here!" Don's angry voice hollered out of nowhere. Rook slowly opened his eyes. The ground was littered with all kinds of things that had fallen down from shelves. Rook spotted the fox. Don was on a shelf, snapping at it, claws unsheathed and hissing loudly. The fox had climbed onto the car and was growling loudly, leaping up at Don.

"W-what about you?" cried Rook. He really wanted to get out. He ached to just shoot out of the garage and leave Don. At least he'd be safe. He was right beside the exit. He could leave. He would not die. He snuck nearer to the exit and stepped out. There was a loud crash as a large bucket came crashing down onto the hood of the car. The fox let out an annoyed shriek and scrambled onto another shelf. Don scrambled off his own shelf and landed on some old toys. Rook bit his lip and slipped back into the garage. The fox bounded towards Don while he struggled to get off the toys. Cursing himself under his breath, Rook charged at the fox. He dug his unsheathed claws into the fox' tail. It twisted around in shock and anger and thrashed Rook to the ground. Rook hit the ground hard, his whole body shuddering. The breath was knocked out of him and the world seemed to spin. He felt the fox' hot breath on him and let out a small cry.

"What are you doing?" Don's annoyed and gruff voice shouted as he distracted the fox once more. Rook scrambled to his feet, unsure what to do. "Get out of here!"

"How about you?" Rook asked.

"I'll be fine! I told you, I was going to die soon anyways," Don said, leaping onto the roof of the car. Rook took a moment but finally, he headed for the exit. But the fox spotted him and rushed towards him. Rook pelted out of the garage. Outside, the morning was cool. Birds squawked and fluttered away as Rook burst out of the garage and pelted down a street. The fox was hot on his trail. Rook's feet were barely touching the ground. He was barely thinking straight. He just knew he had to run. Run run and run. Suddenly, there was a loud noise as a car zoomed by. The fox skittered to a halt and fled. Just like that. And it was over. The fox was gone. Scared of by a car. Rook slowed down and leapt onto a fence. He then climbed a tree and settled on a branch, breathing deeply. He watched as a few other cars passed by, thanking them. He caught his breath and settled down, letting the aching in his chest fade. He looked out for Don. A while later, Don appeared, trotting down the street. He had a gash on his side which was bleeding down and staining his already dirty fur. He spotted Rook and joined him on the branch.

"Good job kid," he grinned, his teeth bloody. Rook cringed.

"Are you alright?" Rook asked, nodding towards the cut on his side. Don nodded.

"Yeah. Better than I could've been," Don shrugged it off.

"Thanks," Rook said. Don had saved his life. "For saving my life."

"No problem kid," Don waved it off as if it were nothing. "Mmm, what a great start to today." Rook looked at Don to see if he was being sarcastic but there was no trace of joke on his face.

"Ready to set off?" Don asked lightly.

"Um..., uh.., "Rook shrugged. He was not thinking about the journey anymore. That was the least of his worries. He could only focus on the fact that he had met a fox and he had almost died.

"Lost your tongue?" Don teased.

"No," Rook answered. "I just- I mean, do you think you can walk with your- your wound?"

"'Course," Don said. "It's nothing I tell you."

"Um. Ok," sighed Rook. "If you say so. But um, do you think we could take a rest first. I need to... settle down."

"Alright kid," Don relented. "I'll go get us some food." Rook nodded and his stomach grumbled hungrily at the thought of some food. But he didn't feel like getting down the tree any time soon.

"You stay here," Don said to his relief.

"What if the fox is still here?" asked Rook.

"It's not. I'm sure it only comes out at night, when nobody is around. It's unlucky that it found us but it won't want to risk being out now, when there are humans," Don assured Rook knowingly.

"Right," Rook nodded. With a curt nod, Don leapt off the tree and trotted away, tail held high.

# Chapter 53

Willowpaw's vision was blurred. Her whole body felt like it was burning. She felt as if she were on fire. She didn't know where she was, nor did she care. Sleep lured her into its embrace. When she awoke once more, the distinct smell of oak trees confirmed that she was in ThunderClan. She wondered if anybody would find her. What they would do if they did. She wondered if her Clan was looking for her. Probably not. They were probably happy that she was finally gone. That they never would have to see her again. Willowpaw curled up into a ball on a bed of bright red, orange and brown leaves. ThunderClan had the blazing colours of red, orange, brown and yellow spread all over it. She clenched her eyes tight. Some time later, Willowpaw awoke to the scuffling of feet and the chattering of voices. She knew at once they were ThunderClan. But there was nothing she could do. Nowhere she could hide. There were no bushes, the ground was covered in leaves and there were no tall grasses to hide in. Willowpaw pulled herself tighter together and closed her eyes once more. Maybe, just maybe, they might not see her.

"Dad!" an excited voice said.

"Hey, don't roll in the leaves," laughed a tom. Willowpaw recognised the voice. It was the strong but gentle voice of Blazestar.

"Let's race to the WindClan border!" another happy voice cried.

"Duskpaw, what did you learn with Cherrycall today?" purred a she-cat.

"Fighting!" exclaimed Duskpaw. "We did the backkick."

"I learnt that *moons* ago!" bragged what Willowpaw thought to be Duskpaw's sister.

"Oh yeah? Then do it!" replied Duskpaw indignantly.

"I'm sure you both know it. Anyways, how about that race?" cut in Blazestar, his voice a purr.

"Yeah!" cried Duskpaw. "Let's race."

"I'm going to win. Again," Dawnpaw shouted. Willowpaw frowned slightly. They seemed so happy. That was a perfect family.

They all loved each other. They cared for each other. They had fun with each other. Maybe that would be what her family would have looked like. If Stormkit hadn't been snatched away. Suddenly, the voices stopped.

"What is it?" the she-cat asked. Willowpaw glanced up. They were standing a few trees away and she was still hidden from view but soon, they would see her. Blazestar's pelt seemed to match the blazing colours of the leaves. Beside him stood a beautiful she-cat. She had a fluffy tail and white fur with light brown patches. Duskpaw, a dark orange cat with one black ear, trotted beside his sister, Dawnpaw. She had swirling light orange fur. Willowpaw bit her tongue and tasted blood.

"WindClan," murmured Blazestar. "Both of you, stay here."

"Aw, come on," Duskpaw protested.

"We're coming! You're going to need backup," cried Dawnpaw excitedly. Leafpetal calmed them down.

"Stay here," she repeated.

"No, we're coming!" exclaimed Duskpaw.

"stay here. I'm the Clan leader," Blazestar commanded and fixed them both with a stern gaze. Leafpetal took a step towards Willowpaw's direction.

"Over there," Leafpetal said. Seconds later, Blazestar and Leafpetal laid eyes on Willowpaw.

"WindClan cat!" Blazestar's voice was dangerous. "Get up!" Willowpaw closed her eyes and buried her head in her paws. Leafpetal reached her side and grabbed her scruff. Willowpaw let out a small whimper. They were going to kill her. Nobody would know what had happened. Nobody would care.

"She's just an apprentice," Leafpetal said, letting go of Willowpaw's scruff. Willowpaw stumbled back, hitting the tree. She looked down at her feet. Blazestar approached, scanning the area.

"Are there more of you?" he growled.

"She's just an apprentice Blazestar," Leafpetal told him. "Don't be too harsh."

"She's in our territory," retorted Blazestar. He approached Willowpaw once more, stepping dangerously close to her. Staring at the ground, Willowpaw saw his feet. His claws were sharp and unsheathed. He was ready to attack. She knew she stood no chance against him. Let alone him and Leafpetal.

"Duskpaw, Dawnpaw, go back to camp," snapped

Leafpetal, spotting her kits getting closer. Then she turned back to Blazestar.

"She's alone. I only smell her," Leafpetal told Blazestar. He nodded in agreement. He took a small step back but his gaze was fixed on her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his voice booming across the forest. It shook Willowpaw. She didn't know what to say. It was as if her voice was lost.

"What are you doing here?" repeated Blazestar, getting slightly more angry. "You know you are not allowed into ThunderClan. We aren't going to let you go like that. Now explain." Leafpetal watched Willowpaw carefully.

"She ran away," Leafpetal said finally.

"What?" Blazestar said.

"She ran away. Look at her," Leafpetal repeated. "You did, didn't you?" Willowapw shrugged.

"Answer her," Blazestar growled.

"Yes. Yes I did," Willowpaw murmured softly.

"Why?" Blazestar asked, his voice was gentler but Willowpaw couldn't find the confidence to look up.

"I don't- I don't want to talk about it...," Willowpaw whispered. Blazestar narrowed his eyes the flicked his tail.

"Follow me," he said sternly. Willowpaw did as she was told. She was lead deeper into ThunderClan territory. Finally, they padded past a bush and entered ThunderClan camp. Warriors were dozing off, watching the leaves falling slowly from trees. Some kits were playing in piles of leaves, their cries of joy were sharp in Willowpaw's ears. All commotion stopped as they entered camp. Murmuring started and cats gathered.

"WindClan...," the words drifted to Willowpaw's ears but she didn't listen. She stared in awe at the camp. She had never seen any other camp besides hers. ThunderClan was much more different. It seemed brighter, earthier, somehow. A snow white she-cat with one red ear stepped forward.

"Who is she?" she questioned.

"We found her in our territory," Blazestar told her.

"Stealing our prey?" the she-cat's accusing eyes locked onto Willowpaw. Willowpaw gulped and stared at her feet.

"No. Sleeping," Blazestar replied.

"Sleeping!" repeated the cat, unbelievingly. Smallbush

pushed forward.

"Do you want me to check her?" Smallbush asked.

"No. She seems alright," Blazestar replied.

"Not to me," Smallbush shrugged. Blazestar raised an eyebrow.

"Right. You can check her. It'll be better in the quiet of the medicine den," he decided. Smallbush led Willowpaw to the medicine den. Blazestar and the she cat followed behind her. Willowpaw ducked her head as they entered the den. It was dug underground. The dirt walls gave Willowpaw a sense of comfort. Large roots bulged out from the walls, acting as shelves, stacked with all kinds of herbs. To one side, there were nests made out of bramble, twigs, leaves and moss. They looked big and comfortable. Smallbush nodded for Willowpaw to sit down.

"let me check your paws," he said.

"What are we going to do with her? This cannot be overlooked without a punishment," the she-cat said to Blazestar. Willowpaw had figured out by now that she was the deputy.

"Yes. I know Soulstorm. That's why I need to talk to you. We need to find an appropriate punishment," Blazestar said. Willowpaw gulped with fear. They were probably going to claw her eyes out or rip her ears apart. She shuddered unintentionally.

"Don't be scared," Smallbush told her.

"She should be put on tick duty for five moons," Soulstorm said. "And she should not be allowed to train for those five moons. She can become a warrior five moons later. That'll teach her."

"Unfortunately, it won't be our task to punish her. Her own Clan will have to do it," Blazestar sighed. "We will only get to give suggestions."

"Why didn't you just chase her out. Give her a few scars. That would've taught her," Soulstorm rolled her eyes. "This is so much harder."

"I know. I know," sighed Blazestar. "But you know Leafpetal. She wouldn't have agreed."

"So what? You're the Clan leader," huffed Soulstorm. "So what are we going to do with her?" Blazestat thought for a while.

"We'll go talk to RiverClan's leader. See what Gorsestar thinks. If their punishments do not suit what we think she deserves, then we'll deal with her ourself," Blazestar decided. "Sound good?"

"Sounds great," grinned Soulstorm.

# Chapter 54

Rook and Don were nearing the forest. They still kept near the village, not going too far from civilisation. Night was almost coming. The next day, they would have reached the forest. Rook would finally meet the famous Clan cats and perhaps, he would finally get answers. And find his family. He would see Saffanah again. Suddenly, Don collapsed.

"Are you ok?" Rook asked quickly, crouching beside Don. Don rolled to his side and groaned.

"Yeah. Fine," he muttered, rolling back to his feet. Rook could see he was unstable.

"You don't seem fine," Rook pointed out.

"Just- just a little dizzy," Don waved it off.

"Let's find somewhere to stay the night," Rook decided, leading Don towards the houses. They walked down a quiet street, Don was starting to limp. Rook wondered if he was indeed going to die. He didn't know what he would do if Don did die. Rook finally settled for a spot in a garden where a lot of bushes gave good shelter. Before Rook could settle down beside Don, a cat padded out from a cat flap and wandered down the garden. Rook frowned, locking his eyes on the cat. The cat was a light orange with a look of youth about him. Don groaned, rolling onto his side and closing his eyes. The orange cat suddenly seemed to sense them. He turned to the bushes and Rook stepped out.

"We don't mean trouble," Rook said first. The orange cat smiled.

"Oh hey there!" he seemed slightly excited. "Who are you?"

"We're only staying here a night," Rook assured the cat. "We'll be gone tomorrow morning."

"Really?" exclaimed the orange cat, trotting closer. "Where are you going?"

"No where," Rook said.

"Tell me!" begged the orange cat. "I'm a bit of an adventurer myself." Rook looked at him unbelievingly.

"I doubt that," Rook murmured. "To the forest. We're going

to the forest. Where the Clans are." The orange cat's eyes widened.

"NO? Really!? ME TOO! I've always wanted to explore the world!" exclaimed the orange cat. "We could go together."

"Don't you live with your family?" Rook nodded towards the house.

"Yeah. But- well, they aren't exactly the best family. And I've always wanted to explore the world. See everything beyond this neighbourhood. Do you think I could join you guys?" The orange cat asked. Rook thought for a moment. He didn't see any harm in it. Although the orange cat might slow them down.

"I'll talk to Don about it," Rook said.

"Oh, is that your friend?" asked the orange cat. "I'm Horizon by the way."

"Cool," said Rook. "I'm Rook."

"Great to meet you," grinned Horizon. He peered into the bushes where Don was resting. Don hissed at him.

"It's ok Don," Rook said, appearing behind Horizon. "This is Horizon. He wants to join us." Don rolled his eyes.

"Not another youngster. We're good," he grunted.

"Aw. Come on. It's more fun with company," Horizon said.

"No," Don said.

"Come on... Are you alright?" Horizon tilted his head and wrinkled his nose. "Something smells rotten."

"Yeah you," growled Don. Horizon frowned.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No. Go away. Rook make him go away. He's giving me a headache," growled Don.

"Come on," Rook said, leading Horizon away. "Let's leave him alone."

"He seems faint. What happened?" asked Horizon, following Rook away from the bushes.

"Fox," Rook replied.

"wow," Horizon gasped.

"So you really want to come?" Rook said. Horizon grinned and nodded.

"Then you can. I mean, I know Don doesn't want it. But you can just tag along until we reach the forest. Then we'll go seperate ways," Rook said.

"Great," nodded Horizon. "Are you hungry?"

"Sure," Rook shrugged. He had already eaten some prey Don

had hunted but any extra food would not hurt. Horizon led Rook into the house. It was bright and messy. Things lay everywhere, scattered on tables, shelves and chairs. Rook wrinkled his nose.

"It's kind of messy," Horizon said, leading Rook to the kitchen and nodding to a bowl. It was a large stainless steel bowl. Rook was surprised to see all kinds of food inside. Sausages, rice, sardines, biscuit. He gobbled it up gratefully. It was delicious. The most delicious and tasty thing he had ever tasted! It was divine.

"Wow," he mumbled, gobbling down the last bite.

"you could have left some," Horizon said then shrugged. "But I guess it's fine. We're leaving tomorrow."

"Do you get to eat that EVERYDAY?" asked Rook.

"Yeah. It's just their scraps," shrugged Horizon.

"Wow. Well that's some good food," Rook sighed.

"Fresh prey is better," Horizon shrugged.

"Right. I'm going to check on Don. See you tomorrow," Rook said, padding away.

# Chapter 55

Willowpaw looked down at her paws, she didn't think she would ever be able to meet somebody's eye again. She heard the ThunderClan cats leaving and wanted to curl into a ball and cry. She wanted to hide from the world. Hide from everything.

"I can't believe you would do that...," said Gorsestar under his breath. "Anyways, I hope you really reflect on what you did. And I hope that this punishment will let you think about what you did and that you will repent." Willowpaw couldn't even manage a nod. She was so ashamed. So embarrassed. So sad. Brownclaw stood not too far off, a look of disappointment and hurt on his face. Mintspot was beside Gorsestar, her eyes blazing with fury, disappointment and every bad emotion in the world. At least, that's what Willowpaw told herself.

"You may go," Gorsestar said. Willowpaw turned around and almost sprinted to the apprentice den. The other apprentices were there, ready to make fun of her.

"You coward!" howled Snailpaw with laughter. Snowpaw and Dovepaw chuckled and taunted Willowpaw as she snuggled into her nest.

"Leave her alone!" yelled Acornpaw, trotting to Willowpaw's side. He lay down beside her and tapped her on the back.

"Loser!" snapped Snailpaw.

"Willowpaw. Don't listen to them. Why did you run away?" asked Acornpaw.

"I don't know...," sniffed Willowpaw. "Why don't you just go away?"

"You're my best friend. Your punishment's not too bad," Acornpaw said. "Once, Snailpaw had to clean ticks off the elders for two moons, non stop."

"But his lessons weren't taken away from him!" sighed Willowpaw. "Brownclaw is so disappointed. He really thought he'd be able to train me to be a good warrior."

"Of course he can!" exclaimed Acornpaw. "You're going to be a good warrior. Just because you don't have training for half a

moon and you're not allowed to go out doesn't mean *train*. You can train with me."

"Really?" asked Willowpaw.

"Yeah. I promise," promised Acornpaw.

"You'll train with me?" Willowpaw asked once more.

"Yeah," assured Acornpaw.

"Thank you," Willowpaw managed a small smile. Acornpaw was like the light in her dark world. She couldn't help but feel so happy when she was around him, so grateful.

"Thanks for being there for me," whispered Willowpaw.

"Always," swore Acornpaw.

# Chapter 56

Rook woke Don up. Don groaned but managed to get up. The sun was just starting to rise.

"Are you ok?" asked Rook. "Are you sure you can walk?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Don indignantly. He strode out of the bush and down the garden to prove it. "Right, are you coming? Let's go. The forest awaits you." Rook nodded.

"Wait. I sort of..., well, Horizon is joining us," Rook said. Don made a face.

"Are you serious?" he demanded.

"Yeah. Look, he'll just stay with us until we reach the forest, ok? And you're not even coming into the forest. So you won't need to see him for long," Rook said.

"Hpmh," huffed Don. He walked down the street. "Right then. You guys catch up with me." Rook nodded, wondering when Horizon was going to come. Just then, Horizon peered out of the cat flap and grinned.

"I was wondering if you guys were awake yet. Where's Don? Are you hungry?" asked Horizon, joining Rook's side. Rook shook his head.

"Don took a head start. Let's go," Rook said, motioning across the street. Together, they rejoined Don who was ambling forward very slowly.

"You don't look very good," Rook said, noting the nasty gash from the fox had not gotten better. In fact, it seemed to have gotten worst.

"I'm fine," shrugged Don. "Stop pestering me." They walked in silence until they finally reached the edge of the forest. Rook was filled with a huge buzzing feeling. He was there. He had reached it. He had found it. The trees were big, towering even. Inside, it seemed to be dark, shadows flickering everywhere, ready to pounce. But they were there. That's all that mattered. As Rook was about to say something, Don yelled.

"Run!" Rook spun around, to see a large slim dog bursting out from the grasses. Horizon and Rook took off, fleeing swiftly through the grass. The dog was at their heels. The dog was a

majestic, dangerous spotted german short haired pointer, with floppy ears, a strong nose and sharp teeth. It was right at Rook's heels, snapping at him. Rook could hear its heavy breathing. There was a shout in the distance.

"Get'em Gunner!" a man cheered from far away. Rook's mind went blind with anger and fear. He followed Horizon, who was streaking towards a tree. Horizon was surprisingly quick. They reached the foot of the tree and Horizon shot up, climbing safely into the high branches of the tree, chest heaving. Rook leapt up, unsheathing his claws. He dug them into the bark and as he struggled to get out, a branch broke underneath him. He felt the world spinning and suddenly, the breath was ripped away from him. His whole body hit the ground and he groaned. His mind was whirling, his vision blurry. He felt the sharp teeth of the dog on his neck. He was going to die. He knew the hard, death delivering bite was coming. At least he had gotten to see the forest. Although he had never been able to say goodbye to his family. He ached to say goodbye to them one last time. And to Domino and Don. There was a screech and the sharp teeth were gone. Rook, trembling, rolled to his feet. To his horror, he saw the large dog, with Don clinging on to it.

"Get to safety!" ordered Don loudly. The dog growl and threw Don to the ground then angrily, leapt at him. Rook watched in total horror as the dog seemed to ravage Don in a fit of hissing, snarling and growling. Rook couldn't bring himself to move or climb the tree.

"R-rook. Come up here," Horizon's unsteady voice came. Rook was frozen.

"Gunner. Aus! Aus!" the man appeared from nowhere, his voice booming. The dog barked at Don who was limp on the ground and reluctantly trotted to his master's side. The man wore hunting gear, a gun slung over his shoulder. He had a cap and a ragged beard. Rook set his eyes on the man with loathing.

"Can't kill the cat here. Those people are watching," the man almost laughed. "Let's go." Gunner glanced at Rook once but trotted after his master. Rook's limbs unfroze and he rushed to Don. Don's fur was matted and coated in blood. His foot was tangled in a dirty mess and blood seeped onto the ground, creating a huge puddle of red. Don's ear was clipped and his sides were badly scratched. His eyes though, were focused on Rook.

"No. No..., no. Don...," mumbled Rook, looking frantically around. Horizon crept towards them, his eyes filled with fear.

"He's going to die. He's going to die," Horizon kept murmuring to himself in horror.

"No. No, you're not going to die," panic flared inside of Rook. He couldn't let Don die. Not like this. "I'm going to find help."

"There's no helping me kid," Don said in his gruff voice. "I'm dead.

"No Don. No please. Don't say that," begged Rook, his voice almost a whisper.

"It's the truth. I've been telling you from the start. I didn't have long to live. It's my time to go," Don said, his eyes flickering.

"No. No. no," repeated Rook, over and over again.

"I hope you find your family, kid. Stay safe, ok? Don't do anything st-stupid," Don whispered hoarsely. He heaved and took a loud painful breath. Rook gulped and crouched beside Don, a wave of cold despair and sadness mixed with mingled anger at the man and the dog. Don was still.

# Chapter 57

Willowpaw was sat in the elder's den, removing ticks from the elders.

"You know, I was there, when Mintspot gave birth," Antpelt said thoughtfully. He was sprawled on the otherside of the den, watching Willowpaw carefully. Willowpaw didn't answer. The job was tedious, boring and it stunk.

"We both were," said Russetstorm, moving to her side and making Willowpaw lose sight of a tick. She almost sighed out in exasperation.

"You should be happy you weren't taken away. Like Stormkit," Antpelt said. "It was a terrible night, that night. You both should have been born in the warmth of the nursery. But I guess that's how battles are." Still, Willowpaw didn't say anything.

"you don't talk much," Russetstorm commented. "I know this is a tedious job, but it would be better if you talked." Willowpaw didn't answer, she didn't know what to say. All Willowpaw could think about was her mother. She knew why Mintspot hated her now. Why Mintspot never paid enough attention to her. Why Mintspot loved Stormkit more than her. It was because she was the reason why Mintspot could never be a warrior again.

"Do you miss Stormkit?" asked Antpelt. Miss Stormkit? Willowpaw didn't even know Stormkit. He was just an idea, a character formed in her mind to fill in the question mark that was Stormkit.

"No. I don't miss him. Just the idea of what it would be like with him," answered Willowpaw finally, telling herself talking wouldn't make anything worst at this point.

"Ah finally!" said Antpelt. "She talks."

"Hey, it's a sensitive subject," Russetstorm gave Antpelt a firm look.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"So is Mintspot still you know-..., devastated over it? The loss of Stormkit I mean," inquired Russetstorm.

"Yeah," said Willowpaw. Mintspot was. Willowpaw didn't think anything would ever make it better. Mintspot would never

truly be happy again. Not unless she had Stormkit back.

"Hmm...," Antpelt sighed. "I've seen how she treats you. She seems distant. You must know, that she does love you. She just doesn't show it. I think it's because she thinks that if she does show that she loves you, maybe it would be a sort of betrayal to Stormkit." Willowpaw shrugged. She knew why Mintspot didn't show her love. It was because of Willowpaw. Willowpaw had made Mintspot lose the use of her leg. That's why Mintspot wished she had been taken away instead of Stormkit. Her first born. The best kit.

"You've grown into quite a beautiful young cat," smiled Russetstorm, changing the tone of the conversation. Willowpaw didn't know how to react to that. Nobody had ever called her pretty. Not her father. Definitely not her mother. Not even Acornpaw.

"T-thanks," stammered Willowpaw, finding herself smiling.

"Yes," agreed Antpelt. "You are. So how is your training going? Brownclaw is your mentor. He's a great warrior, you are very fortunate." Willowpaw nodded, scrunching her nose as she found another tick.

"How long are you not able to leave camp for?" asked Russetstorm.

"Half a moon," answered Willowpaw.

"Hmmm. That's a long time," Antpelt said.

"Yeah," Willowpaw shrugged. She couldn't wait for night to come. Acornpaw would teach her everything he had learnt that day. She ached to practise with him.

"I can see your mind is somewhere else," Russetstorm said finally. "You missed this tick." Russetstorm pried a tick away from her.

"Sorry," mumbled Willowpaw.

"It's ok. Let's say you're done here alright?" Russetstorm said gently. "Don't tell anybody though."

"Thanks," smiled Willowpaw. She clamped down on the mouse bile and trotted to the front of the den.

"Nice to talk to you," called Antpelt.

"See you tomorrow," added Russetstorm with a small wink.

"See you," replied Willowpaw before trotting out of the

den. It was early evening and Acornpaw was not back yet. Only Whitepaw and Dovepaw were in and they were jumping with excitement in the apprentice den. Willowpaw turned away, she did not want to interact with them. Instead, she headed for the nursery. She didn't know why. As she slipped inside, the familiar smell wafted into her nose. The soft sand under her paws gave her a feeling of safety. The nursery was empty as there were no kits in the Clan, although the Clan was murmuring that Moosetail and Spottedcall may be having kits soon. Then Willowpaw heard the familiar voice of Acornpaw. She burst out of the nursery and spotted Acornpaw talking to his mentor by the entrance. She hesitated a moment but finally Acornpaw turned away and saw Willowpaw, a smile lighting his face. He joined her.

"Hey, how was your day?" he asked.

"Good," replied Willowpaw automatically. Acornpaw raised his eyebrows.

"Well, as good as it gets," Willowpaw corrected herself. Acornpaw laughed.

"I've got so much to show you. But first, I'm starving!" Acornpaw exclaimed. Willowpaw and Acornpaw shared a large crow as Acornpaw explained everything he had done that day.

"I trained with Snailpaw. We fought a bit. Of course, I destroyed him!" Acornpaw said. "We learnt soo many new moves. I've got to show you this one. It's quite hard but I'm sure you'll get it in no time. It' s really cool and effective. And I also managed to perfect the back kick. Do you know how to do it?"

"Well..., we tried it. But I'm not that good," Willowpaw replied.

"Oh well, I'll teach it to you. I'm sure you'll get it," encouraged Acornpaw. Willowpaw loved to see Acornpaw's perpetual happiness. It was like he was a ball of joy. He always wanted to chat or play. He was so enthusiastic about life. Willowpaw didn't know how he did it but she admired him. She wished she would be as happy as him one day but it was like a dark cloud seemed to be following her everywhere she went, casting depression, dark thoughts and bad luck at her. Later that night, when all the cats had retired to their nests, Acornpaw and Willowpaw stood under the cover of some trees. Acornpaw had succesfully taught Willowpaw a new move and they were now practising the back kick.

" Try again. Be more confident and faster," Acornpaw urged. Willowpaw nodded, getting ready. She lashed out, pressing her weight on her front paws and kicking Acornpaw with her back legs. Acornpaw tumbled to the ground and leapt back up, a wide grin on his face.

"That was awesome! Again!" he cried. Willowpaw sighed in relief, glad that he was alright.

"Haha. Thanks!" she grinned. She tried it once more. Then again. They did over and over again until Willowpaw could do it instinctively. They finally collapsed on the ground, breathing hard. But they were both smiling widely as they stared up at the star filled sky.

"That's StarClan," said Acornpaw. "Watching over us." Willowpaw doubted that StarClan was watching over but she couldn't deny the great vastness of the sky. It was majestic. Beautiful. Breathtaking. It stretched on forever. Willowpaw wondered if anybody else was watching the sky, somewhere far away in the world. She wondered if they could see the same, twinkling stars as her. The same great dark sky above.

"I haven't watched the stars like this before," Acornpaw said softly.

"Me neither," Willowpaw agreed. She had never stayed up this late to watch the stars. They were truly breathtaking. The sky was bigger than anything she could ever wrap her mind around. It was a beautiful deep carpet of twinkling colours.

"I like it. Especially with you," Acornpaw said almost too softly.

"Me too," Willowpaw beamed truthfully. Willowpaw wondered if anybody else was watching the sky, somewhere far away in the world. She wondered if they could see the same, twinkling stars as her. The same great dark sky above.

# Chapter 58

Rook stared up at the vast sky. It was completely clear with bright stars dotting the dark carpet of night. The air was cool and a small breeze blew. It was warmer than most nights. Horizon was curled up under the tree a few meters away, sleeping soundly. Rook shuddered at the thought of Don, dead and limp. Horizon and Rook had dug up a hole in the dirt and buried Don after sharing a few words about him. Rook had seen it in the human movies although he had never thought he would have to do it himself. Beyond the tree where Horizon rested was the forest, darker and more dangerous than ever. Rook almost didn't want to go in there anymore. Don was dead. Dead. He was never coming back. Rook couldn't wrap his mind around what had happened. The fact that Don was never going to come back. Don wasn't going to ever crack another joke again because, all the jokes Don had said about dying soon, had finally come through. The thought sent shivers down Rook's spine. Rook didn't want to enter the daunting forest, leaving Don behind. He rolled onto his stomach and stared at the peaceful shape of Horizon sleeping. Rook didn't hate Horizon, he was glad that Horizon was there. At least he had a bit of company, to share the sadness with, even if Horizon was sleeping peacefully as if no worries plagued his mind. Rook sighed and curled up on the spot. He closed his eyes and tried to fight off reality.

Rook blinked his eyes open to see Horizon's foot in front of him.

"You awake?" asked Horizon softly.

"I am now," Rook mumbled, yawning. He stretched and blinked as bright sunlight filtered into his eyes.

"I didn't know if I should wake you. You seemed so peaceful. But dawn passed like three hours ago," Horizon said. "Also here. I hunted." Horizon dropped a mouse at Rook's feet. Rook hadn't known Horizon knew how to hunt, assuming that he was a pet and had never had the need to know.

"Oh. Thanks," Rook said.

"No problem," shrugged Horizon. "I'm sorry. About Don. I really am."

"It's ok," Rook replied. "It's not your fault."

"Yeah. Well, are you going to the forest?" asked Horizon.

"I don't know," Rook frowned. "I don't think I want to anymore." He found himself shivering, not because of the chill of the morning.

"Oh. I'll stay with you longer here if you want. To mourn for Don," Horizon suggested.

"I don't think I want to go to the forest anymore like ever," Rook explained. "I think I want to just go back. I won't find my family. They gave me away. Maybe they'll come and visit me. But I don't want to continue this- this impossible hunt to find them. In the end, they left me. It was their choice. They left me. I shouldn't cross the world to find them."

"Why not? if you love them, you should," Horizon said, tilting his head to study Rook. "You know, if there's something that I've learnt about humans, it's that their lives are complicated. Like way more complicated than our lives will ever be. And sometimes they make huge mistakes. Like leaving you."

"I guess," Rook frowned, unconvinced.

"Are you sure you don't want to go the forest?" asked Horizon. "You came all the way here. Don't you want to explore the world? See more than any other cat has ever seen?"

"I don't know. I do. I mean it sounds nice. But I just want to be with my family, more than anything," Rook sighed.

"I for one, want to travel the whole world. Or as much as I can. I'll come with you. To find your family. If you want me to. It'll be an adventure together," Horizon suggested.

"I- thanks. That's nice of you," Rook said, looking up and meeting Horizon's eyes. Horizon reminded Rook a bit of Domino, just more gentler and with a more calm aura about him.

"You know what, Don wouldn't want me to just give up. He'd want me to go on. After all, that's why he jumped on that dog. To let us carry on," Rook decided. "Let's go." Horizon smiled.

"I knew you were brave!" he exclaimed. Together, they marched towards the looming forest, leaving behind the tree and Don, buried underneath it. As they reached the edge of the forest and Rook took his first step in, the strong scent of pine and something else invaded Rook's nose.

"What's that smell?" asked Rook.

"I don't know," Horizon said, wrinkling his nose. "Smells

really strong. Like cats."

"Yeah. A lot of cats. Not very friendly at that," Rook nodded. Clan cats. Definitely Clan cats.

"What if they attack us?" Rook asked the question they were both thinking.

"I don't know," Horizon said. They had padded further into the forest. Pine trees were everywhere, tall and dark, blocking most sunlight from coming in. Birds called but beside that and the shuffle of Rook and Horizon's steps, there was nothing. Suddenly, something flashed in Rook's vision. He swivelled around. Nothing. Horizon looked at him.

"What's wrong?" asked Horizon nervously.

"I thought I saw something, it's probably nothing," Rook shrugged it off but the feeling of unease remained. They stopped talking from then on, making sure to be very quiet. They could feel the threat hanging over them. Just as they thought they were safe, a cat appeared in front of them. This cat was like no other cat Rook had ever seen before. This cat was completely white with one red ear. Her eyes were deep and piercing and her body rippled with muscles. She was dangerous. Rook could feel it in her stance, in the way she glared at them. Her tail was long and it twitched slightly. She stood there, strong, eyes glued to them. Horizon shuffled closer to Rook, his eyes wide with fear.

"H-hello," stammered Rook. The she-cat locked her eyes onto him and sunlight caught her sharp claws. The she-cat snarled, revealing sharp fangs. Rook was sure she would not hesitate to use them.

"Hello there," the she cat said finally, her voice ringing loud and clear in the vast forest. "And who are you?"

"I- I'm Rook," Rook managed to utter. "And this-this is H-Horizon."

"What are you doing here?" asked the she cat, padding closer, her steps slow and deliberate, like a predator. "You do know where you are, don't you?"

"N-no we're sorry. We didn't mean to intrude. See, we're um, new here. We just wanted to meet the Clans. We- we'll be on our way now," Rook tried to explain without letting his voice shake with fear.

"Oh meet the Clans," the she cat smiled. "Well, why don't I introduce you. My name is Soulstorm." The name seemed

just as dangerous and powerful as her. "And this, is ShadowClan."

# Chapter 59

After quickly finishing with Antpelt and Russetstorm, Willowpaw trotted out into the clearing and towards the trees. She was going to practise her back kick and everything Acornpaw had shown her the next day. She wasn't going to lose all the battle training Brownclaw had taught her. She was going to start training with him once more and be an even better fighter than she had before the punishment. As Willowpaw practised on the bark, Beetlejaw approached her. He watched silently at first, until Willowpaw finally realised he was there. She turned to him, almost ashamed. She didn't know if practising fighting moves was breaking the rules because nobody had told her but somehow, she still couldn't bring herself to meet Beetlejaw's gaze bravely. The last time they had talked, it had ended in a cold scolding.

"You need to put your weight more on your front paws and be more explosive," Beetlejaw told Willowpaw. Willowpaw took some time to process what he was saying. "Do it again." Hesitantly, Willowpaw crouched down. Beetlejaw nodded for her to proceed. Listening to Beetlejaw's advice, Willowpaw pushed her weight to the front and lashed out with her back legs in a quick movement.

"Good," praised Beetlejaw. Willowpaw felt her stomach churning with the praise. She hated that she was nervous around everybody but Acornpaw. But this was a big deal. Something she had dreamt of her whole life. For her father to teach her how to fight. Of course, most fathers did it for kits, when they were young, to get them ready for apprenticeship but this was better than nothing.

"Do you know how to do a belly rake?" asked Beetlejaw.

"A bit," Willowpaw uttered.

"Show me," demanded Beetlejaw in his deep voice. Willowpaw hesitated once more but then threw the move.

"Right this is what I want you to do...," Beetlejaw corrected Willowpaw. They trained the whole afternoon and by the end, Willowpaw had learnt three different moves and perfected the belly rake. As she and Beetlejaw rested, she couldn't help but beam brightly. She had trained with her father. Together. It had been

fun.

"Next time, I'll show you an upright lock," Beetlejaw said, resting beside Willowpaw. Next time? Willowpaw was practically jumping up with joy when Gorsestar called a meeting and Mintspot appeared.

"Beetlejaw?" she said. "Are you coming?" Beetlejaw leapt up and without a backwards glance, trotting up to Mintspot's side. They ambled towards the small stump together. Willowpaw followed a moment later, scared of what Gorsestar was going to say. Was it something about her? About her punishment? Or maybe she was going to be banished? Willowpaw sat behind the crowd, nervously shifting on her butt. Acornpaw joined her, asking her what was wrong, she replied saying it was nothing. Gorsetar stood beaming on the rock and silence settled.

"I would like to call Dovepaw and Whitepaw up," Gorsestar announced. Dovepaw and Whitepaw, both stood up proudly, their fur well groomed. They padded away from their parents, Silentwhisper and Fernspring, their gaits proud and majestic. They joined Gorsestar and he turned to them, a beam on his face.

"I, Gorsestar, leader of WindClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn," announced Gorsestar. Willowpaw's eyes almost went wide. Whitepaw and Dovepaw were becoming warriors! That's why they had been so excited the day before. Willowpaw had never seen a warrior ceremony and she found herself paying her full attention.

"Whitepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" demanded Gorsestar in a loud voice.

"I do," replied Whitepaw in a clear voice.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Whitepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Whiteleap. StarClan honours your bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan," declared Gorsestar. Whiteleap stood straight and puffed out his chest. Then Gorsestar rested his muzzle on Whiteleap's head and Whiteleap licked his shoulder. Gorsestar turned to Dovepaw who was almost jumping with excitement, her eyes were bright.

"Dovepaw, I call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand teh ways of your noble coed and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn," Gorsestar repeated once more but for Dovepaw.

"Do you, Dovepaw, promise to uphold the warrior code and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?" questioned Gorsestar, his eyes shining brightly.

"I do," Dovepaw answered in a loud and brave voice. Her tail was twitching and Willowpaw could tell that under her excitement and bravery, she was still nervous.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. From this moment on, you will be known as Dovecloud. StarClan honours your persistence and enthusiasm and we welcome you as a full warrior of WindClan," finished Gorsestar grandly. Dovecloud beamed and shot a look at her brother who grinned back. Then the Clan burst into cheers, making Willowpaw jump. Acornpaw stood up and cheered the new names of the two new warriors as well.

"Dovecloud! Whiteleap! Dovecloud! Whiteleap!" chanted the Clan. They all gathered around the new warriors as they stepped down from the small stump, ready to greet them. Willowpaw smiled. Although they had not been very nice to her, she was happy for them. She really was. They were part of her Clan and seeing them proud and happy made her proud and happy.

"Come on Willowpaw!" grinned Acornpaw, bouncing towards the crowd. "Let's go congratulate them." Willowpaw bounded after Acornpaw, forgetting every mean thing Whiteleap and Dovecloud had ever said to her. As they finally reached them, Acornpaw congratulated them as old friends and they beamed back proudly at him. When Willowpaw reached them though, she found her tongue was stuck. She was glad for them. She really was. But she couldn't bring herself to say anything.

"Congratulations," blurted Willowpaw finally, forcing the words out. She felt ridiculous. She knew they were going to cast her away. Them turning into warriors didn't change their opinions about her. They still hated her. Whiteleap glared at her then turned around to talk to some other warriors. Willowpaw bowed her head and begun to turn away.

"Thank you," Dovecloud said. Willowpaw turned around, surprised. Dovecloud flashed Willowpaw a smile before turning to

talk to her friends.

# Chapter 60

Rook was suddenly aware of something else. Another presence beside Soultstorm. Horizon glanced to his side and to his horror, there was another cat, standing still, watching. Rook looked around. While Soulstorm had been talking, cats had surrounded them. He counted three in total. They were all strong and wild. They were warriors.

"I'm sorry but the tour of ShadowClan is over. If you'd kindly leave our territory," Soulstorm purred in a mocking tone. Rook thought it was too good to be true. Then there was a flash of movement and Horizon let out a scream. A dark brown cat charged at Horizon and from behind, another cat wrestled Rook to the ground. He thrashed wildly. He felt claws dig into his sides and let out a wail. He felt teeth grab his fur and rip it. He threw his attacker off for another cat to face him. This cat was a young spotted female.

"Get him Petalpaw!" shouted the cat that Rook had thrown off. He stood a meter away, watching Petalpaw and Rook. Petalpaw let out a snarl and pounced on Rook. Rook unsheathed his claws and did whatever he could do to survive. He dug them into Petalpaw's sides. She growled and bit into his ear and pulled. A sharp pain ran through his body. With a burst of strength, Rook threw Petalpaw off him and shot off. He didn't check for Horizon. He felt bad for that but he knew if he stayed any longer, he would not survive. They would tear him to bits. He heard two cats chasing him, one was Soulstorm. He hated the thought of having to fight her. She would destroy him in a second. The other cat was a brown tabby. They were yowling ferociously as Rook fled. Then he spotted some way away was Horizon. Horizon was being chased by the dark brown cat and his tail was in between his legs. Rook pushed himself to go faster. They might be able to escape together. Harmed but not dead. Then Soulstorm tackled Rook to the ground. He let out a whimper. Oh no. He yelled and struggled but Soulstorm pinned him down, hissing. She dug her claws into his side.

"Soulstorm!" a voice shouted. Soulstorm glanced up and Rook managed to slip free. The tabby cat appeared in front of Rook,

blocking his way and behind him was Petalpaw, ruffled and angry.

"What are you doing?" demanded a voice. A cat as black as night appeared. Rook was about to faint on the spot. If it was possible, she looked even more scary than Soulstorm. She was as black as the night.

"Chasing these rogues away," hissed Soulstorm. The black she-cat padded to Rook and studied him, her eyes were cold and pierced him. He looked down, unable to meet her gaze. To his left, Horizon was being herded toward him by the large brown cat. Horizon stumbled and stood beside Rook.

"They barely look older than apprentices," noted the black cat. "They are not a threat. Dogtooth and Trailrunner, get to the border and check for any other cats. Petalpaw, you may go with your mentor." Trailrunner, the brown tabby cat nodded to Petalpaw and followed Dogtooth away.

"We weren't going to kill them," Soulstorm assured the black cat.

"We cannot kill any cats. You all know that. It is the warrior code," the black cat said although her eyes were filled with hatred towards Rook and Horizon. "The other Clans would go against us if they found out we had killed some kittypets."

"Right, Batstar," nodded Soulstorm. Batstar flicked her tail. Rook knew at once that she was the Clan leader.

"Follow me," ordered Batstar. Together, the cats led Rook and Horizon deeper into the forest. Finally, they reached a forest floor covered in red and yellow leaves and skeleton like trees. Batstar turned to Rook and Horizon, her claws unsheathed and her eyes dark.

"If you dare cross this border once more, we will hurt you more than you can imagine," Batstar warned in a low voice. Rook nodded, believing her completely. Soulstorm glared at Rook, her eyes fixed on him, ready to pounce if he were to do anything out of line. Horizon and Rook turned around and quickly ran further into the oak forest until ShadowClan was far behind them. Rook and Horizon turned back to make sure the blood thirsty cats were gone.

"I'd heard of ShadowClan before but I never thought they'd be this scary," shuddered Horizon.

"Yeah....," Rook shook himself and took a deep breath. They were not in danger anymore. "We're ok. We're safe now." Just as the words left his lips, two cats appeared. One was a striped

brown cat and the other was a tortoiseshell cat. Rook motioned to Horizon and the quickly and silently, retreated away. The cats were talking together, not paying attention to anything. This was good, Rook and Horizon snuck away, their heartbeats racing. Horizon stepped on a twig. Crunch. The sound was almost louder than anything Rook had ever heard. He shot Horizon a look and Horizon bit his tongue.

"Sorry!" he cried.

"Did you hear that?" one of the cats said. The two cats stopped walking and scanned the area. Rook and Horizon pressed themselves to the ground, barely hidden by a almost bare bush.

"No. Probably a bird or something," shrugged the female cat but the tom shook his head.

"I'm sure it was something," he insisted. "I'll go there. You go left." The she-cat shrugged.

"Alright Mosshowl," sighed the she-cat. "I thought we were going to go on a relaxing stroll. Just you and I." Disappointed, the she-cat turned around and started to pad away.

"Sorrelpelt," Mosshowl called. "I'm sorry. Yes, I know this was going to be a nice walk. You're right. I'm sure it was nothing. A bird, like you said." Sorrelpelt smiled a little and they walked away together once more. Rook and Horizon shared a sigh of a relief.

"Let's get out of here," murmured Horizon. Rook nodded. All thought of his family and finding answers were gone, replaced by the sheer need to get away unharmed from all these Clans.

"Yeah," agreed Rook, nodding vigorously, "let's."

# Chapter 61

Willowpaw dug her teeth into the delicious raven. She was settled down in the shade of a tree, watching the activities of the Clan in silence. She was reminded of being a kit. This was what she would usually spend her days doing. Mintspot limped into view. Willowpaw lowered her eyes but was aware that Mintspot was approaching her.

"I talked to Brownclaw," Mintspot said, sitting down beside Willowpaw. Willowpaw didn't move. She didn't know what to say. Her brain was frozen. Her body could not physically move. This would basically be the first conversation they were having after Willowpaw became an aprpentice.

"I know why you ran away," Mintspot said. "It is not your fault. That I'm crippled." Willowpaw opened her mouth finally but no words came out. She didn't know what to say. Her mind was blank. What was she supposed to say? This was the last thing she had been expecting.

"You don't need to say anything," Mintspot said, then took a deep breath. "I know I don't share my... *feelings* with you very often. But..." Mintspot paused her a moment and Willowpaw could see that she was trying hard to phrase her words.

"B-but I want to tell you that I am-" Mintspot struggled. "Well I'm proud of you. For becoming an apprentice. I know I did not say it before...." Willowpaw's eyes almost fell out and her stomach flipped. Her mind could barely grasp what Mintspot was saying. Proud? Willowpaw beamed, her heart beating a thousand beats per second.

"I am proud of you," continued Mintspot after a pause. "And I know I should have told you this before. But seeing you up there... I could not help but think of Stormkit. He should have been up there with you."

"I know," Willowpaw said finally, finding her voice.

"But it is still unfair of me... to have... ignored you," Mintspot said slowly. "Beetlejaw talked sense into me and I understand how you might have felt."

"Thank you," Willowpaw said, the queasy feeling in her

stomach would not stop.

"Oh also," Mintspot added, her voice turning cold and serious once more. She no longer struggled with her words and her voice was strong and confident. "Stop hanging out with Acornpaw. He's a bad influence. It's good that you're an apprentice. It is. But you should remember your brother. He never got and never will get this experience. Don't go on and live life like that, while your brother will never get to be happy." Willowpaw opened her mouth to respond but she didn't know what to say. Of course, she knew she had to follow what her mother was saying. Her mother was all she cared about. She just wanted her mother's approval. And if not hanging out with Acornpaw was going to get it, maybe she had to do it. Willowpaw nodded.

"Of course," she answered although her voice cracked.

"Good," Mintsport smiled although it seemed forced and her eyes were monotone. Mintspot got up and dragged herself across camp. Willowpaw watched her go, her heart sinking and leaping. She didn't know how to feel. She was feeling elated, excited. Her mother was proud of her. That was all she wanted in her life. Just to hear those words. From her mother. It was enough to make her day, no, even her year. But..., another part of her was torn between her mother's approval and love and Acornpaw. He had always been there for her. He made her smile everyday. Made her laugh. Everything about him made Willowpaw happy. But still.., he didn't understand. He wasn't part of the family. He wasn't Stormkit. Willowpaw stood up, finishing her food, she had made up her mind. She could not talk to Acornpaw again.

# Chapter 62

Rook and Horizon found themselves in tall grasses. They knew they weren't safe, although they were out of the forest. Rook could smell cats. Something about the smell sparked something in his mind but he didn't know what. He padded carefully. The soil felt right on his paws. Horizon followed him more cautiously.

"We really need to get away from the Clans," Horizon said.

"Yeah," nodded Rook, not listening fully. "I didn't think it would go like this. I thought we'd be able to talk a bit more-civilised." Horizon stopped beside a large fallen tree. Its bark was split as if struck by lightening a long time ago as moss and all kinds of plants were growing onto it from the ground. Rook sniffed, something about the tree flashed in his mind. He was delusional. He shook himself.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Horizon, stopping to smell the air.

"WindClan," Rook replied instantly. He knew.

"Oh," Horizon said. "Which way out of the forest?"

"I want to talk to them," Rook said, making up his mind.

"What do you mean?" Horizon asked skeptically.

"I think, I think I might find answers here. Maybe to my family. I don't know. But answers," Rook tried to explain what he was feeling. Horizon raised an eyebrow, not understanding.

"Are you sure? I don't want to almost die once more," Horizon cringed at the thought of the ThunderClan and ShadowClan cats.

"I'm sure. Look, just trust me, ok?" Rook said, giving Horizon a pointed look.

"Why would they know anything about your family though?" challenged Horizon, not completely convinced.

"I don't know. We'll see," Rook shrugged.

"Not very convincing," sighed Horizon. "But I guess we're going to have to go with it because they're here." Horizon gulped. Rook spun around and sure enough, a group of cats had appeared. They were slim with long legs and long, thin tails. A dark brown cat with shining fur stood at the edge of the patrol and Rook felt a jolt

in his body although he didn't know why.

"And who are you?" a dirty grey cat growled, his eyes dark and locked on Rook and Horizon. Horizon shuffled behind Rook, trembling slightly. Beside the grey cat was a younger brown tabby cat.

"Kittypets," the smaller cat judged although Rook could see muscles rippling under his thin fur.

"mmm. You made a mistake coming here," hissed the dirty grey cat. Horizon squeaked. The sleek brown cat in the back, didn't say a word but his eyes locked on Rook and Rook could feel them assessing him. The grey cat looked back.

"What are you doing Beetlejaw? Let's get em," the grey cat questioned. The brown tabby, an apprentice, nodded vigorously.

"No. Sootwhisker. Don't," Beetlejaw replied, his eyes fixed on Rook. "I-I have a feeling."

"What do you mean Beetlejaw?" Sootwhisker made a face.

"Let's get em!" exclaimed the apprentice.

"No. Acornpaw," Beetlejaw snapped. Then he walked forward until he stood right in front of Rook. Rook could barely breath but he held Beetlejaw's eye contact. Rook didn't know what he was feeling but he knew something about this cat was different.

"Who are you?" Beetlejaw questioned, his voice was low but there was a slight tremble.

"My name is Rook. I'm here for answers," Rook replied as confidently as he could. From behind Beetlejaw, Sootwhisker and Acornpaw advanced, tails low and claws unsheathed.

"Hmm. Follow me," Beetlejaw finally decided, swivelling around. Sootwhisker shook his head.

"What are you doing?" he cried. "No. We're driving them out of here."

"Trust me Sootwhisker, this is different," Beetlejaw said, looking dead serious. Sootwhisker paused a moment, glaring at Rook but finally relented. Beetlejaw led Rook and Horizon into the tall grasses. Rook smelt it. It was a beautiful fresh air. He loved it. He imagined running through it, with nothing blocking his way. To feel the wind in his face. Horizon padded nervously beside him, casting glanced at Sootwhisker and Acornpaw who walked behind them, pressing them forward. Finally, they reached the camp. Beetlejaw slipped under a short tunnel. Rook followed with Horizon on his tail. They emerged in a calm camp. Cats turned up from what

they were doing and got up, chattering amongst themselves. They approached. A light striped cat who looked slightly old but wise, trotted forward. His eyes reflected wisdom and knowledge. Rook's gaze flitted over the heads of countless cats but landed on a particular she-cat. She had light brown fur and sad eyes. They were almost hollow. Her back leg was limp and she craned her neck over the crowd. Rook couldn't stop staring.

"What is this?" the old cat demanded. A she-cat with light grey fur, appeared beside the old cat. "Beetlejaw?"

"I- I- Can we talk in private?" Beetlejaw asked the cat.

"Alright," nodded the older cat. Rook and Horizon were led into a den with all kinds of herbs lining the walls. A dark brown striped cat was there, his eyes rested on Rook then dipped his head.

"What is the meaning of this?" questioned the she-cat with light grey fur.

"I will explain Doestripe, Gorsestar and Troutfur," Beetlejaw acknowledged the cats then turned to Rook. "I just... there is something about him. About you." Beetlejaw spoke directly to Rook. He didn't know what to say. Then another cat appeared.

"This is private!" Gorsestar called. "Unless you need medical help."

"It's me," a she-cats voice floated into the space. Beetlejaw made a face and got up. He padded to the entrance but the she-cat burst in. She made her way down, dragging her limp leg behind her. Then her eyes were on Rook. He stared right back. The way the she-cat seemed to be reading him was disconcerting.

"Mintspot?" questioned Doestripe.

"S-S-Stormkit?" stammered Mintspot in almost a whisper. Gorsestar and Troutfur shared a look. Beetlejaw watched, his emotions carefully hidden. Horizon sat back, feeling completely lost. He just wanted to get out.

"N-No. My name is Rook," Rook corrected. Mintspot advanced until she was right in front of Rook. He could smell her. She smelt familiar. The scent tickled his nose. He looked away.

"Mintspot, this is a private conversation," Doestripe said kindly.

"No Doestripe. Just wait," Gorsestar told Doestripe, his eyes on Mintspot. Beetlejaw padded beside Mintspot. He watched her, his eyes full of concern.

"No. No..., I know- I'd know you anywhere. Stormkit... Stormkit!" Mintspot cried. She seemed delusional to Rook. Whatever had made her cripple probably messed up her brain. Who in the world was Stormkit?

"I'm sorry, you're mistaken," Rook said softly. "I'm Rook. And that's Horizon. I just came..., for answers. About my family." As he said that, something dawned on him. Family. About his family. But which family. His cat family or his human family. Rook softened, looking inot Mintspot's eyes. He saw himself reflected back.

"Stormkit... it really is you," whispered Mintspot, her whole body shaking.

# Chapter 63

"I'm sorry Acornpaw. I can't- I can't talk to you," whispered Willowpaw, turning away. Acornpaw frowned, confused and concerned. He didn't know what he had done but he knew he had to make it right.

"I'm sorry. What did I do? Please tell me....," begged Acornpaw.

"No. Acornpaw. I'm sorry. I just- I can't," Willowpaw mumbled. Her voice was barely a whisper. Acornpaw stepped in front of her, blocking her way. She looked him in the eye. She saw sadness reflected. She felt a pang of guilt. She gulped. She didn't want to hurt Acornpaw.

"I'm so sorry. It's- It's Mintspot," stammered Willowpaw.

"Mintspot told you not to, didn't she?" Acornpaw finally understood. He turned serious. "What did she tell you? Are you going to listen to her? You're going to shun me for her?"

"I'm sorry," repeated Willowpaw. She really was.

"Are you hearing the rumours?" Acornpaw questioned, blocking Willowpaw from turning away.

"No. Just go away. I'm sorry," Willowpaw said.

"They're saying that that cat is Stormkit," Acornpaw told Willowpaw. He watched her reaction. She frowned. She didn't move. Stormkit? He wasn't alive. He was dead. It could not be. It would not be. But what if it was? She wished more than anything it was. Then her family would be fixed. Everything would be alright. But she couldn't get her hopes up.

"Don't believe everything you hear," Willowpaw answered.

"I'm not- why do you do everything Mintspot tells you to? Don't you ever wonder if it's actually for your own good? Or maybe it's just for Stormkit's sake. For his memory," Acornpaw questioned. Willowpaw shook her head.

"Don't say that. Mintspot cares about me. And Stormkit," Willowpaw almost choked.

"Does she?" Acornpaw asked seriously. Willowpaw bit back tears.

"Don't say that!" she sobbed.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean it like that. I'm just saying...," apologised Acornpaw. "What if that is Stormkit? If it is, we can be friends forever. We can, can't we? And if it's not Stormkit... If it's not Stormkit then you' re going to have to chose between me and Mintspot. But I'm pretty sure it's Stormkit. Mintspot just went into the medicine den. And- well that means we can still be friends."

"No. I'm sorry. If it really is Stormkit. Then my family is fixed. And that- that's more the reason I need to listen to Mintspot," Willowpaw forced back the tide of sadness and guilt that was threatening to burst out.

"W-why?" Acornpaw's voice was soft. "I never told you. I love you." Willowpaw almost jumped. She pricked her ears. The most beautiful words. I love you. Words she wished she could be told. The words she wished her parents would tell her, to validate her. She stared at Acornpaw. His gaze was filled with sadness and maybe.., just a bit of hope. She loved him too. She hated hurting him. But she hated defying Mintspot.

"I love you. I do," Acornpaw repeated. Willowpaw almost cried. Thank you, she wanted to whisper.

"I do. I love you too," Willowpaw blurted. "But- but it doesn't matter. We can't hang out."

"Of course we can. You have to chose," Acornpaw said seriously. "You have to chose between me and Mintspot. If you chose me..., then I promise to always be there for you. To always make you laugh. To always listen to you and to never hurt you. And if you chose Mintspot... then I won't ever bother you again." Willowpaw's breath was snatched away. She wasn't thinking about Stormkit anymore. Or Mintspot. Her thoughts were only on Acornpaw. What would she do without him? She couldn't survive. No, she couldn't live without him. He was the only one that made her laugh. Complimented her. He had said he loved her. He loved her. He was not afraid or ashamed to love her. And even though Mintspot would hate her for it, Willowpaw loved Acornpaw too. She could imagine a life without Mintspot because..., after all, her whole life had been a life without Mintspot. As she thought about it, she knew it was true. When had Mintspot ever been there for her? When had Mintspot made her laugh? Made her smile? Had Mintspot ever told her she loved her? No. Never. Could Willowpaw imagine a life without Acornpaw? No. She couldn't imagine that. She didn't want to imagine that. She didn't want to lose him. She

wanted to see his smile everyday. And when he couldn't smile, she wanted to be there to make him smile. No, she could not live without Acornpaw because no matter what Mintspot or anybody told her, she did love him. She did want him. And for the first time in her life, she didn't care if Mintspot approved or not.

"Willowpaw?" Acornpaw breathed. He looked so fragile. As if he were a leave about to be blown over by a cold breeze.

"I chose you."

# Chapter 64

Rook stared down at the cat named Mintspot. She licked him lovingly on the head. He shrunk away and Horizon made a face.

"I think she loves you...," he muttered, slightly disgusted and very scared.

"Yeah..," Rook trailed off, his eyes wide. He didn't know what to do.

"Mintspot," Beetlejaw said calmly, trying to make Mintspot step back. "Give him some space. You don't know... We don't know if its really Stormkit." Gorsestar nodded.

"Troutfur, bring Mintspot to her den," he told Troutfur who nodded and walked over to Mintspot.

"No!" snapped Mintspot. "I'm not leaving. Beetlejaw, you know it's him. You brought him back!"

"Yes, I know but... don't get your hopes up," Beetlejaw said calmly.

"Mintspot, follow me," Troutfur said, then inched toward the den wall and picked up a calming herb. "Here, eat this." Mintspot refused.

"I know it's him! It's finally him! Stormkit is back! And you want to drag me away!" exclaimed Mintspot, her eyes wide and her tail lashing side to side, angrily.

"Mintspot...," Troutfur tried to calm her down.

"Gorsestar, let her stay," Beetlejaw asked, his eyes pleading. Gorsestar relented.

"Fine," he said. "But let me do the talking," Gorsestar ordered. This time, Mintspot crouched back and let Gorsestar pad in front of Rook.

"Who are you?" demanded Gorsestar.

"Well. I'm *Rook*," Rook said pointedly, mostly to Mintspot. He was not Stormkit. "And this is Horizon. I came here for answers. About my family. But it's obvious to me now that you don't know them. So if you would be so kind as to escort us out of here." Rook tried to put on the best smile he could. Doestripe shot Troutfur a look. Beetlejaw studied Mintspot, to make sure she was fine.

"Right. Well, since you're here. We are going to get some

answers and perhaps, you will have answers as well. Maybe even about your family," Gorsestar replied.

"I'm pretty sure you don't know them. Her name is Saffanah. And Jeremy and Diana," Rook explained.

"Twolegs," Doestripe muttered.

"He's a kittypet," huffed Troutfur. Beetlejaw glared at him, making sure Mintspot hadn't heard.

"Do you know who your parents are?" interrogated Gorsestar. "Your *real* parents that is."

"No," replied Rook carefully. "But it doesn't matter. I don't care."

"Right," Gorsestar frowned, narrowing his eyes. "Do you know where you were found? How you found your *Twoleg* family?"

"Twoleg? Oh *humans*," Rook said, nodding slowly. "I don't know. Our neighbor gave me to my family. Twoleg family."

"Ok," Gorsestar took a deep breath then to himself, he muttered, "how are we going to do this?"

"If I may," Troutfur interrupted. Gorsestar looked up and stepped aside.

"Go ahead," he nodded.

"Let me explain, *Rook*," Troutfur started, his voice calm and his posture confident. "It was a long time ago..., but it seems like yesterday. Mintspot, gave birth to two kits. It was on a stormy night, a battle of all the Clans was just ending. Mintspot gave birth to two kits, Willowpaw and Stormkit. She had given birth healthily, barely escaping a falling tree although Mintspot did not emerge unharmed. When suddenly, a Twoleg appeared. He stopped and Stormkit, was left there. The Twoleg took Stormkit. Mintspot was- and is, heartbroken. We thought he was dead. We have always thought he was dead. That we would never see him again. But it seems, that, he is not dead. That you may be the missing Stormkit."

"He is. He is," sobbed Mintspot. Beetlejaw comforted him, trying to keeping himself calm although emotions were flooding through, him all uncontrollable. He was as unstable as Mintspot. If this was really Stormkit, his whole world would change. Maybe Mintspot would be healed. Maybe she would become the lively, carefree cat he had known before. The cat he had fallen in love with. Rook stared at Beetlejaw and Mintspot, his supposed parents. He tried to process things. He had never known his cat family. It seemed weird that they were from a Clan. But then again, nothing

was too hard to believe at that point. Rook studied Beetlejaw. He seemed sad, happy and concerned. He could see that Beetlejaw was hiding his emotions, trying to be strong for Mintspot, who was very clearly collapsing. It was obvious to Rook how much Beetlejaw loved Mintspot. It looked like Beetlejaw would do anything for Mintspot. He had stuck to her for so long when she looked so broken and frail. Like she would never be happy again. As if she were about to collapse and break right there.

"Rook?" Horizon's small voice came from behind. Rook turned around to see Horizon huddled in the corner, eyes wide with fear.

"They're not going to hurt us," Rook assured Horizon. He was sure of that now. If they were his long lost Clan and his long lost parents were there in front of them, they were not going to be hurt. "Don't worry." Horizon nodded feebly.

"So..., what do you want me to say?" asked Rook. "That I'm Stormkit?"

"I'm sorry. But we're not sure he is Stormkit," Doestripe pointed out. "He could be anybody."

"No. That's my son! That's Stormkit! Why won't anybody listen to me?" wailed Mintspot.

"Mintspot. It's ok. I'm listening. I know. I know it's hard for you," Beetlejaw whispered.

"No! Nobody understands! The pain I'm in!" yelled Mintspot. Rook stared at Mintspot then at Beetlejaw. He understood then that Beetlejaw did understand. Beetlejaw understood more than Mintspot would ever know. Because although it seemed like Mintspot was the saddest, frailest and most distressed, Beetlejaw was worst off. He was just as broken. He needed somebody, but he had nobody because he was already helping a broken somebody.

"I just- Mintspot..., I know I shouldn't be saying this..., it's none of my business but..., Beetlejaw does understand. I know I'm an outsider but it seems very clear to me that Beetlejaw understanda the most and perhaps..., he's the one suffering the most. He doesn't show it because he wants to help you. And that means that nobody is helping him...," Rook said softly. He felt a connection to Beetlejaw. Beetlejaw smiled a little. Mintspot looked up and frowned. She knew this was Stormkit. But what did he know about Beetlejaw and her?

"Stormkit...," uttered Mintspot. Gorsestar interrupted the

awkward silence that followed.

"Alright. We are going to find away to determine if you really are missing Stormkit. In the meanwhile, we will show you around. You may sleep in the apprentice den, understood?" Gorsestar started listing out commands. "You and Horizon are to be under supervision at all times."

"Beetlejaw, can you bring them to the apprentice den and introduce them please?" Gorsestar said politely although it was an order. "Doestripe, Troutfur and I need to talk. And Mintspot, I'm very happy if this really is Stormkit. The Clan will rejoice. But for now, go get some rest." Mintspot managed a nod.

"Follow me," Beetlejaw flicked his tail and supported Mintspot as they padded out of the medicine den. Mintspot stared at Rook with such love it made him uncomfortable.

"I know you're my Stormkit," whispered Mintspot.

"Mintspot. Go rest. Do you want me to come with you?" Beetlejaw asked. Mintspot thought for a while.

"I'll be fine," she said then added in a small, kinder voice, "Thank you." Beetlejaw smiled back. He watched her leave. Cats gathered around, staring at Rook and Horizon, muttering and gossiping.

"Follow me. Move out of the way!" called Beetlejaw. He led Rook and Horizon to a den entrance. "This is the apprentice den." They entered. Inside, a sweet looking she-cat sat next to a light brown tabby.

"Willowpaw, Acornpaw, this is... Rook, and Horizon," introduced Beetlejaw. Willowpaw's eyes landed on Rook and he frowned. It was as if she was evaluating him.

"Hi," Acornpaw said flatly.

"He's going to be staying her tonight. Why don't you show him around camp? Or just, talk to him. Accompany him," Beetlejaw said then trotted away, leaving Rook, Horizon, Willowpaw and Acornpaw alone.

"They're saying that you're Stormkit," said Willowpaw.

"I heard," Rook said, making a face. He wanted to get out of this crazy camp. Horizon trembled behind Rook, regretting every decision which had led to this.

"Well, are you?" asked Acornpaw.

"I don't know. I mean, no. I'm not. Of course not," Rook dismissed the thought. It was crazy. These cats were crazy. The

faster they would get out the better. Maybe they should try and escape now. But Willowpaw's eyes were trained on him. He didn't know what she was thinking but it made him uncomfortable.

"You can have these nests," Acornpaw said finally, shooting a look at Willowpaw he mumbled softly, "Are you alright?" Willowpaw nodded in reply and her eyes slowly tore away from Rook. She whispered something in Acornpaw's ears.

"Right," he whispered back. "Go ahead." Willowpaw stood up and padded out of the den while Acornpaw smiled at Horizon and Rook. It was obvious that it was a forced smile.

"Well. How are you?" Acornpaw blurted, trying to distract them.

"I'm feeling faint," mumbled Horizon in a shaky voice. Then he fainted.

# Chatper 65

After a long, relaxing walk through WindClan, Willowpaw finally returned to camp. She slipped in quietly and padded to the apprentice den. The two dark shapes of Rook and Horizon were bundled together. Willowpaw couldn't help but watch them in the dark. She was sure that Rook was Stormkit. She didn't know how but there was no doubt in her mind. She walked slowly to her nest where Acornpaw was sleeping next to. Snailpaw was curled up the furthest away from them as they could. He snored lightly. Willowpaw settled down and Acornpaw's eyes fluttered open.

"Hey. You ok?" he murmured sleepily.

"Yes. Thank you. Much better," smiled Willowpaw, snuggling beside him. He slept once more, as they warmed each other up. Willowpaw fell into a blissful sleep.

*The air was still. The night sky seemed to envelope the world. It was peaceful. Quiet. Willowpaw sat, looking around, taking everything in. Although everything seemed silent, Willowpaw was aware of the swaying grass and the sound of peace. Willowpaw didn't move. She didn't need to. She liked it here. She liked this nice, serene place. There seemed to be no worries here. Nothing to plague her mind. Nobody that looked down at her like a disappointment.*

*"Do you know where you are?" a cat appeared. Willowpaw frowned. Something occurred to her. StarClan. Was she in StarClan? She had heard many cats talk about it. How they had seen StarClan and they hadn't realised it was StarClan until a cat had suddenly told them. To Willowpaw though, this seemed different. This was not how she expected StarClan to be. Plus, why would she be in StarClan? She had never really thought about StarClan. Who from StarClan would want to talk to her? It was probably a dream. Her imagination running wild once more.*

*"Yes," said Willowpaw to answer the cat. She did know where she was. In her own mind. Her thoughts. Her imagination.*

*"Do you know who I am?" continued the cat. The cat was white with some patches of brown and orange fur on the head. He looked young and strong. He was a cat Willowpaw had never met before, how*

*could she be imagining him.*

*"No," answered Willowpaw truthfully.*

*"I am Splashclaw," the cat said nonchalantly. Willowpaw cocked her head. Splashclaw. She had never heard of him.*

*"Why am I dreaming about you?" asked Willowpaw. "I- I didn't know I could imagine such things." Splashclaw paused a moment, thinking.*

*"You are in StarClan," he finally said.*

*"Oh," Willowpaw frowned. StarClan. How weird. She had thought it would be day all day and cats would have plenty of food and they would be lounging lazily about or playing and chatting. She had not imagined it as so vast and quiet, lonely yet free.*

*"I-I never thought I'd go to StarClan. Unless, I guess, when I died," Willowpaw wondered aloud.*

*"Yes. Well, here you are, do you like it?" Splashclaw inquired. He seemed to be in no hurry.*

*"Yeah. I mean, it's- yeah. It's not what I expected. It's very... calm," Willowpaw shrugged.*

*"I was a warrior of RiverClan. I died seven moons before you were born," explained Splashclaw. "I was going to be deputy, you know."*

*"Oh. I'm sorry," Willowpaw frowned. She still did not believe she was in StarClan. Why would this dead cat want to talk to her?*

*"It's not your fault," sighed Splashclaw. "It's nice here though. I get to watch over my Clan too..."*

*"H-how did you die?" asked Willowpaw, wondering whether it was rude to ask.*

*"Ah. Well, long story short, there was a fight at the border. With ShadowClan. I was not on patrol. So I was alone. Against three of them. They had tried to steal our prey. So of course, I dumbly confronted them," Splashclaw explained. "I was badly wounded when my Clanmates found me. It was Beetlejaw, who found me, you know. He is- was.... is..., I don't know but we definitely were best friends. He brought me to the medicine cat. He tried to heal me but I was weak and it was cold. Leaf-bare. Greencough finally got hold of me. And brought me here." Willowpaw cocked her head, not knowing what to say. She had never talked to a dead cat before.*

*"Beetlejaw hasn't mentioned you...," Willowpaw said finally.*

*"Oh. Yes. Anyways, we're here to talk about you. Well, not you exactly but there is something I need to tell you," Splashclaw quickly said.*

*"What is it?" asked Willowpaw curiously.*

*"It's about Stormkit," explained Splashclaw. "i've been looking over you. All of you. RiverClan. And I know that that kittypet, Rook, is indeed Stormkit. I know you know that too though, don't you?"*

*"Yeah. I mean, I had a feeling," agreed Willowpaw, unsure where it was leading to. Was it about her defying her mother's orders? about her choosing Acornpaw?*

*"You're going to have to tell them. The Clan. That he was Stormkit. Remember, he* was *Stormkit. He is no longer Stormkit. He is Rook. He is a kittypet. And he won't- probably- ever be a warrior. It will be hardest on your mother and father. Trust me on that. I know you will be able to make it through. You've made it through most of your life without him. And your parents will need you. They will need you to be there for them. Even Mintspot. Because I know that they don't want Stormkit- Rook to be snatched away from them again. But you see, he will have to leave. His life is not here. Your parents need to understand that. The Clan needs to understand that Stormkit is gone. Rook is not Stormkit. He is not the kit that Mintspot thinks or still thinks him of. He has grown up to be a totally different cat," Splashclaw said, his eyes locked on Willowpaw. Willowpaw looked at her feet, unable to hold his gaze.*

*"Don't look down," Splashclaw's voice was gentle but firm. Willowpaw slowly met his eyes. "That's better. You need to learn to look cats in the eye. You are not meek little Willowpaw. You will grow to be a strong warrior. Don't look at your feet." Willowpaw nodded feebly.*

*"Do you understand what I'm asking from you?" demanded Splashclaw finally.*

*"Yeah," shrugged Willowpaw.*

*"Tell me," said Splashclaw.*

*"To tell the Clan that Stormkit- well that Rook is Stormkit. But he's not the Stormkit they remember. To help my parents get over it. Because Rook will have to leave," Willowpaw summarised.*

*"And?" prompted Splashclaw.*

*"Don't look at the ground," Willowpaw added.*

*"Good," smiled Splashclaw. "I'll be watching from up here. If you ever think about looking at you feet when somebody is talking to you, remember I'm up here. And look up. I'll be here, watching you. You'll be alright. Have confidence. I have confidence in you." Willowpaw didn't know what to say. She felt the urge to look down in embarrassment at his words but she didn't, she held his gaze.*

*"You're ready to go," beamed Splashclaw. "Goodbye for now Willowpaw."*

# Chapter 66

Rook jolted awake. He blinked. It was dark. Pitch black. Rook took some time to adjust and made out Willowpaw beside Acornpaw. She looked peaceful. He tilted his head. He wondered if Mintspot was his mother. He wondered what it would be like to grow up in this Clan. He would never have met Saffanah and her parents. He didn't think he would be able to live without Saffanah or her parents. They were her family. He was their family. Or, at least he thought he was. They had left him, hadn't they? But they had had no choice. He felt slightly sad at the though, slightly betrayed that they hadn't fought harder to keep him. But he forgave them. He still loved them. He would never not love them. Horizon groaned in his sleep. Rook felt a pang of guilt for dragging Horizon along with him. It was his fault they were here. In WindClan. Rook felt lost. He jumped when a voice spoke.

"Rook?" Willowpaw yawned.

"Yeah," Rook whispered back, ears perked up.

"I know this is weird but... I know you were Stormkit. You were Stormkit. My brother," Willowpaw said. Rook didn't say anything for a moment. He tried to form his words.

"Yeah. Yeah, I think I'm starting to get that," he mumbled finally, it was the truth.

"Yeah. Huh. When you get to know Mintspot..., she's not as crazy or sad as she seems. She's just desperate, you know? She missed you. A lot. After you were gone, I don't think she was ever truly happy. Not once," Willowpaw's voice was small. Rook wanted to creep to her side and hug her. He wanted to comfort her. He didn't like the quiver in her voice.

"I'm sorry," sighed Rook. "I wished I remembered you. And this Clan and Mintspot and Beetlejaw and all... but I don't. I just..., all I remember, all i know is my family. Saffanah, Diana and Jeremy."

"Yeah. I get it," Willowpaw nodded in the dark. "I do. I understand you're going to have to go. And I'm going to make sure our Clan, especially our parents, do not fall apart."

"Our parents...," echoed Rook. Finally, he got up and sat

beside Willowpaw. He leant against her after a moment of hesitation. She didn't move away. She melted into his comforting fur and leaned her head against his shoulder. So this was what it felt like. To have a sister, thought Rook. He liked it. He could feel the bond with Willowpaw. It was strong. It was real. It was something nothing could be broken. Not even when he had been taken from the human. It had always been there. It had guided him here.

"I never thought I could miss somebody I had never met," murmured Rook almost to himself but Wilowpaw heard.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Yeah... I always..., I always dreamt about you. Imagined you. I created this perfect image of us and our parents. A family. A happy family. One where MIntspot would always be happy and Beetlejaw would teach us battle moves and we would play with each other. But I guess, it was never going to happen. It's never going to happen. Because, maybe it wasn't supposed to happen. Maybe you'll go on and find your family, Saffanah and all. And you'll be happy forever. And I'll be with Acornpaw too. He makes me happy. Very happy. And Mitnspot and Beetlejaw will be happy to know that you're alright. They won't be cowering in the doubts and shadows, not knowing if you're dead or alive, wondering if you're ever coming back. Because now I guess, they know. They know you're not dead. That you're fine. That you're ok. That you have a family. A human family but still a family. So..., I guess what I'm trying to say is..., I've let go of my vision of a happy family. A family with you in it. It was taken away that night when we were born. But I'm finally seeing that that isn't necessarily a bad thing." Rook thought about it for a moment.

"I'm sorry. That you went through so much pain. I saw Mintspot, there's something about her... I don't know how you lived with it all these years. With parents so distant from you," mumbled Rook. He truly felt sorry for her. He felt bad he had never really thought about his cat family or cared. He had waved it off, saying he had his own family. While his sister had been neglected and a whole Clan mourned his loss. He dipped his head.

"It's not your fault," whispered Willowpaw. "It's none of our faults."

"In a way maybe it's Arthur McFlint's fault," Rook pointed out then remembering Willowpaw didn't know who he was.

"Who?" Willowpaw asked.

"He was our neighbor," explained Rook. "He lived beside us. He's the one that picked me up. The night of the storm."

"Oh, " was all Willowpaw could utter.

"Yeah. Crazy right? imagine if he hadn't. We would have grown up together. Mintspot wouldn't have been like this. And I wouldn't have met Saffanah. My best friend," Rook said.

"Weird."

"I know. What are they going to do? Tomorrow?"

"What do you mean they?"

"The leaders and Mintspot and everybody. What am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. I know I've got to tell Troutfur. About this dream I had. More like a visit, really. From there, I guess things will just unfold."

"Ok... I can't stay here forever, you know that, right?"

"Yes. I do. I don't think Mintspot or Beetlejaw or the rest of the Clan will understand. Not right away. But I'll make sure they do."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. It's nice, to have a brother."

"I rather like having a sister too."

"When you leave, with Horizon, I hope you find your family. And I will miss you."

"Me too." They settled into a comfortable silence. They both knew they were being honest. Being each other was nice. They would miss each other, a lot. Much much more than before. Willowpaw had finally found her brother and she didn't know if she was ready to let him go right then. She knew she would have to. Even Splashclaw said so. But right then, she wanted to stay beside him forever, knowing that they were siblings. That they would love each other no matter what.

# Chapter 67

Willowpaw was alright. She was more than alright. She finally knew what it was like. To have a brother. A sibling there, by her side. It was better than she could have imagined. It was more than anything she could have imagined. It was like a best friend and family all wrapped neatly into one big package of joy and trust. She felt like she could trust him and he would always be there for her. Yes, they had only just met but she knew that it didn't matter. They both knew they were true siblings. The moons they had spent apart didn't matter anymore. Because they were together once more. It was as if he had never left her. Willowpaw snuggled closer to Rook leaving a gap between herself and Acornpaw. Her eyes fluttered open to see Acornpaw snoring gently. He seemed calm, he was sleeping well. A small smile flickered on her lips. She still loved him. She was happy for a new day. She was not dreading the rising of the sun. Because she would have Acornpaw by her side. And Rook of course. Rook. Her brother. Stormkit. For now, everything was alright. Everything was going to be ok, because she was curled up in the apprentice den, far from harm, with Rook and Acornpaw. Her two very best friends. She never knew she could feel such things. Such bonds with anybody. For a moment, Willowpaw wished Rook could stay forever. That he would join the Clan. But she remembered Splashclaw. She knew Rook had to go. He had to find his Twoleg family. It would pain her when he left but she knew it wouldn't be the last time she would see him. And she would still have Acornpaw. He would be enough. He was enough.

Willowpaw yawned as streams of light entered the den. Snailpaw was already out of the den. Rook was still sleeping peacefully beside Willowpaw and so was Acornpaw. Willowpaw didn't move as not to wake them. Horizon was curled up tightly in a ball, his face hidden in his tail. After a while, Acornpaw started to drift awake. He smiled when he saw Willowpaw staring at him. She smiled back and gave him an affectionate lick on the nose. His smile widened.

"Good morning," yawned Acornpaw softly, returning the lick.

"Morning," beamed Willowpaw.

"You seem happy! More happy than ever! What happened? Good dream? Or was I just the best company ever?"

"Haha. Funny," snorted Willowpaw, rolling her eyes. "You *were* good company but... I also had a dream. From StarClan."

"Really?" Acornpaw's eyebrows shot up.

"Yeah. Rook really is my brother. And- And for once..., I really really think everything is going to be ok. Because he's here and everything is going to be alright and he's just the best brother ever. I knew he was but now I really know, *for sure*." Acornpaw smiled, encouraged by Willowpaw's happiness. He almost frowned at the thought of Rook making Willowpaw happier than he could ever but then he brushed the thought away. He'd be ecstatic if he found out he had another brother or sister he had never met. Especially if that sibling was much less arrogant as Snailpaw.

"I'm glad you're happy. You're making me happy too!" grinned Acornpaw.

"Thanks," smiled Willowpaw. "Do you want to go for a walk? We can bring Rook. Show him around. He'll love it! Oh and Horizon too, I guess." Acornpaw shrugged.

"Sure," he said nonchalantly although he had hoped they would go on a romantic walk alone. Willowpaw had finally chosen him. He would not let her down.

"Rook," Willowpaw nudged Rook in the rib. Rook groaned and covered his ears. "Wake up!" Horizon sprung to his feet instead, letting out a small cough. Acornpaw jumped back, slightly surprised.

"Oh, good morning," said Willowpaw.

"Yeah," nodded Acornpaw. Horizon shook himself.

"ahhh," he shuddered, shaking himself. "Bad dream."

"Right," Acornpaw said.

"Do you want to come on a walk with us? We'll show you around WindClan," suggested Willowpaw.

"Ok," said Horizon, glancing down at Rook. "Is Rook coming?"

"Yeah, once I wake him," nodded Acornpaw, nudging Rook once more.

"What?" Rook snapped, opening his eyes. "Oh. Sorry. I was having such a good dream." Rook stretched and got up, shaking himself too. Pieces of moss fell to the ground. Horizon joined his

side, he still seemed skittish.

"Willowpaw was suggesting we bring you around our territory," Acornpaw explained. Willowpaw nodded. Rook beamed.

"That would be great! Thanks sis!" he exclaimed. Willowpaw's eyes lit up and she trotted out of the den by Rook's side. Acornpaw trudged behind them, followed by Horizon.

"Why are you so skittish?" Acornpaw asked Horizon, watching Rook and Willowpaw trotting merrily toward the entrance. Horizon took careful steps instead.

"I don't- maybe because ShadowClan wanted to kill us!" Horizon cried.

"we're not going to kill you. Unless you do something really bad," Acornpaw reassured Horizon. Horizon made a face.

"Willowpaw, have you told your mentor?" called Acornpaw. Willowpaw turned around.

"About what?" she called back.

"That we're going out. I know Sootwhisker will let me. I already asked him yesterday for a day off," explained Acornpaw, padding towards Willowpaw and Rook.

"oh," sighed Willowpaw. "I haven't told Brownclaw." Brownclaw appeared, yawning into the clearing.

"Well. Now you have. And I'm going to let you, but only this once. There's no skipping class next time," Brownclaw warned then added, "And keep an eye on them. Horizon and Rook, I mean. They're supposed to be under supervision at all times." Willowpaw opened her mouth to defend Rook but Acornpaw quickly stepped in.

"Sure thing! Thanks Brownclaw," he said quickly then herded Willowpaw, Rook and Horizon to the camp entrance. They slipped out. The air was cold and the ground frozen and hard.

"I'm sorry about Rook. They're not sure you're really Stormkit yet. But I'll tell them," Willowpaw apologised.

"It's ok," Rook shrugged. A violent, cold wind blue, ruffling Acornpaw's fur. He fluffed it up and stepped forward, about to press Willowpaw so they could share their warmth. He could see that she was shivering too. But Rook was first to it. He pressed himself against Willowpaw and she gladly chatted with him, sharing his warmth. Acornpaw felt his bones freeze and not because of the cold. Maybe he would be happy when Rook left. Horizon glanced at Acornpaw and trotted after Willowpaw and Rook,

puffing out his coat in protection. Acornpaw followed, slightly less enthusiastic. Willowpaw didn't notice. Her concentration and all of her joy, was all targeted to Rook. Yes, she did like, or even love Acornpaw. But this new appearance of Rook was like a bright burning light of warmth after a trembling, dark night in the cold caves of a mountain. In the back of her mind, as Willowpaw strolled beside Rook, she knew Acornpaw was there. That she should not ignore him. But she still continued with Rook, because he was the cat she had dreamt of her whole life. The brother she had ached for. She finally had him. As long as he was here, she was not going to let go.

# Chapter 68

Rook and Horizon were huddled in the shade of a few bushes, a slim rabbit in front of them. They were waiting while the leader, deputy, medicine cat, Mintspot and Beetlejaw had a meeting in the leader's den. Acornpaw had gone out to train. Whiteleap had been instructed to watch over them. Rook did not like Whiteleap. His eyes were dark and his teeth barred, he seemed ready to skin them. Horizon prodded the rabbit.

"I'll take that," snapped Whiteleap, with a small growl. He grabbed the rabbit and bit a large chunk of it. He swallowed it without tasting it. Rook and Horizon watched him, not knowing what to do. Rook's stomach growled with hunger and Whiteleap gave him a mocking look.

"You should've eaten that when you got it," Whiteleap said, licking his lips and finishing the last bits of the rabbit. "What were you waiting for?"

"We're going to starve!" Horizon exclaimed, his stomach was empty and he stared at the food pile longingly.

"Maybe," shrugged Whiteleap. "Doesn't matter to me."

"Can we get that pigeon?" asked Rook politely, nodding to a pigeon in the food pile.

"No," answered Whiteleap flatly. "You had the rabbit. You should've eaten it straight away. Were you waiting for somebody to cut it up into nice little piece for you or something?" Whiteleap laughed at his own joke. Horizon let out a small growl, he was frustrated. He did not want to stay in WindClan any longer. He liked Rook, but he regretted trusting him. Rook obviously didn't know what he was doing. They were stuck, trapped in WindClan.

"I'm sorry," sighed Rook, as if reading Horizon's thoughts.

"Yeah," nodded Horizon. "You should be."

"I am. Really. I didn't know it would- I didn't know this would happen. I'm sorry we're stuck here. You know, I'll ask if you can leave. They only care about me. And, and I did meet my long lost sister," Rook said.

"Shut up," snapped Whiteleap. "You're hurting my ears."

"Shut up!" snapped back Rook. "You're voice is irritating." Whiteleap leapt to his feet, his fur rising.

"Oh, don't get triggered so easily," Rook said lightly, although inside he squirmed. Horizon gave Rook a small look of fear.

"Kittypet!" hissed Whiteleap. "Don't you dare talk to me like that!" Whiteleap unsheathed his claws and growled, a deep, horrible sound. Rook slowly got up.

"Chill!" he exclaimed, meaning it this time. "Sorry ok? Don't get triggered." Whiteleap let out a snarl and leapt. Rook was flung to the ground. Sharp claws dug into his flesh. He wriggled and struggled but this time, there was no getting out. Whiteleap's face was right beside his.

"I'm chill now," grinned Whiteleap, pinning Rook down. Horizon was frozen to the spot, not knowing what to do, too scared to attack. Rook snapped at Whiteleap, trying to bit him but Whiteleap dug his claws into Rook's flesh.

"Horizon..., a little help?" Rook murmured. Horizon finally acted. He launched himself wildly on Whiteleap. Rook shot up and saw Horizon and Whiteleap rolling on the ground in a fit of hissing and spitting. Rook leapt into the brawl. He bit into Whiteleap's tail and pulled. Whiteleap let out a howl and clawed at Rook's face while Horizon sunk his teeth into Whiteleap's tail. Whiteleap shook Horizon off quickly, making him sprawl on the ground. He slashed Rook across the face. Rook stumbled back, blinded for a moment. Whiteleap pounced on him and bit into his ear hard. Very hard. Rook whimpered.

"Hey!" a voice shouted. "Whiteleap!" Whiteleap didn't listen, he was mad. He was angry beyond calming. He clawed at Rook while Rook struggled. Suddenly, the weight was lift off Rook and Whiteleap was being pushed away by a striped golden she-cat. Another tom trotted over, to calm Whiteleap down.

"What are you doing?" barked the she-cat.

"Let me kill him!" snarled Whiteleap, eyes locked on Rook. Rook's breathing was shallow. He struggled to get to his feet and took a step back. The she-cat and the tom blocked Whiteleap's path.

"You can't kill him," growled the she-cat. "You know you can't. So calm down. You're acting stupid. Gorsestar is going to be furious. You're suppose to be watching them. Not attacking them."

"Move out of my way Goldenfall," Whiteleap warned.

"Whiteleap, you're being ridiculous," huffed the tom. "We're not getting out of the way. So shut your mouth and follow me."

"Don't talk to me like that Lizardpelt," hissed Whiteleap. Lizardpelt narrowed his eyes.

"Now," ordered Lizardpelt. Goldenfall turned to Horizon and Rook.

"Follow me," she said, motioning with her tail. "I'll bring you to the medicine den. Get you cleaned up. You're going to be fine." Rook managed a weak nod. They limped after Goldenfall towards the medicine den, leaving Lizardpelt and Whiteleap to argue alone. The medicine den was empty.

"Settle into those nests," said Goldenfall. "I'll be back." Goldenfall left, leaving Horizon and Rook alone for the first time since they had come.

"We've got to get out of here. This is our chance!" exclaimed Horizon. Some of his fur had been torn off and he had a few scratches here and there but he seemed fine otherwise.

"But you're hurt," pointed out Rook.

"Better than being dead," retorted Horizon. "Let's go!"

"I've got to stay," sighed Rook, thinking about his sister. He couldn't leave her. Not like this. Not without an explanation, without a goodbye. She would be broken.

"This is our chance!" sighed Horizon, making his way towards the entrance. "There's nobody out there! Let's go! I'm telling you, if we don't get out now, we're never getting out." Rooks sighed. He didn't know what to do. His body was aching and his cuts were burning. But they could escape. Get away from all of this insanity. He would never see any of them again. He would never have to explain himself to Willowpaw. Willowpaw... He hesitated at the thought of her.

"Come on!" pressed Horizon hurriedly, peering out of the den. "It's clear. Are you coming or not?" Rook took a deep breath, padded to Horizon's side and said, "No. I'm not. I'm sorry. You go. It's your chance. It was nice knowing you. I'm sorry I got you into this." Horizon stared at him blankly for a moment then dipped his head.

"Ok," he said. "It was nice meeting you too. Wish you the best." With that, Horizon slipped out of the medicine den. He

slipped out of the camp entrance and the last of Horizon Rook saw was his tail. But it too, was gone in an instant. Rook turned away. He liked Horizon. They had not known each other for long but..., he considered him a friend. He would have wanted to get to know him more. Goldenfall finally returned with Troutfur. Troutfur looked disgruntled and slightly annoyed.

"Whiteleap, always him," mumbled Troutfur. His eyes scanned the den. "Where's Horizon?" Goldenfall raised her eyebrows in question, frowning slightly. Rook started to explain, wanting to make sure that Horizon would have a headstart on his escape.

"Right here," a voice said. Rook glanced up at the medicine den entrance in surprise. Horizon stood there. He walked into the den. Goldenfall smiled slightly.

"Ok. Both of you, stand over there," ordered Troutfur. Rook shot Horizon a questioning look. Horizon joined Rook's side.

"I thought we could spend more time together... Afterall, I wanted an adventure, didn't I?" Horizon said. Rook couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks," he grinned. "Being here is slightly more bearable with you." Goldenfall turned to them, tilting her head.

"You know," she said. "You're both free to go. Anytime. Just tell us. You're not prisoners. Just guests."

" Who need supervision," added Horizon.

"Just in case," shrugged Golden. "But if you decide you want to leave. You can. We'll escort you out of our territory. I don't know if its the same for you Rook. We're still figuring things out about the Stormkit thing." Rook nodded.

"oh," was all Rook could muster. Troutfur hobbled up to them, leaves clamped in his mouth.

"Sit," commanded Troutfur. Rook obeyed obligingly. Soon, they were all patched up and feeling much better.

"I'm going back to that meeting," huffed Troutfur, disappearing. Goldenfall shot Rook and Horizon a look.

"You hungry?" she asked them. Their eyes lit up and they nodded enthusiastically. As Rook and Horizon trotted to the food pile with Goldenfall, Rook couldn't help but smile. He had a friend. In this crazy, upside down world, at least he had a friend. And a sister too. Maybe everything would be fine. He would get to know his cat family and his human family.

"I'm glad you came back," Rook told Horizon candidly.

"Yeah. I don't know whether I regret it or not yet," chuckled Horizon. "But..., this was what I was getting into when I decided to leave my humans. I realised that as I was escaping. I wanted to know about the Clans my whole life. And now I've got the opportunity. Then, once we get out, I'll explore the rest of the world. Oh the stories I'll have to tell!" Rook couldn't relate to Horizon. All he wanted was his family. He wanted to live with them for the rest of his life. But he admired Horizon's ambitions.

"You know..., maybe we could do a bit of adventuring together," grinned Rook, afterall he would have to look for Saffanah, and that guaranteed an adventure.

# Chapter 69

Willowpaw only noticed Rook. Acornpaw found it frustrating. He realised how much he missed her. He didn't like her attention being on Rook and Rook only. He knew perhaps he was being selfish. They had never seen each other. They'd been separated for so long. But that's what hurt Acornpaw the most. She had just met him. Yes, he may have been her brother but still... They had just met. How could Willowpaw cast him off like that? Hurt, Acornpaw curled up in a nest beside Snailpaw who was glaring at Willowpaw, Rook and Horizon, chatting together. They had just been let out of the medicine den. Acornpaw found himself wishing Whiteleap had clawed them to death. not Willowpaw of course, but Rook and Horizon. Acornpaw scrunched up his nose.

"I knew you would see my side," said Snailpaw finally. Acornpaw realised his brother was talking to him.

"What do you mean?" grunted Acornpaw. They had not talked in a while but Acornpaw found himself missing Snailpaw's company. It was good to talk to his brother.

"I can see it. You hate them. And her," Snailpaw explained. "I know you."

"I don't hate her! Just them...," sighed Acornpaw.

"You love her, don't you?" Snailpaw rolled his eyes. "I don't understand it. But..., I guess you are my brother. And at least we agree about those two.., Rook and Horizon."

"Yeah," shrugged Acornpaw. "I want them gone."

"Me too. Since the first time they stepped into camp," Snailpaw muttered underneath his breath. Acornpaw didn't answer, his eyes were locked on Willowpaw. He willed her to look up. To notice him. She did not look up. She did not notice him. Willowpaw's eyes were locked onto Rook and his to her.

"You know.., maybe you could stay here," suggested Willowpaw hopefully.

"I can't..," Rook said softly but firmly. "I'm sorry. I am. But I can't. We can't."

"Well. It was worth a try," sighed Willowpaw. "I'm going to tell Troutfur now. About the dream..." Rook nodded.

"Ok," he said.

"Don't get into another fight," Willowpaw called back at Horizon and Rook. They watched as Willowpaw walked out of the den. Willowpaw made her way to the medicine den.

"Troutfur," said Willowpaw, entering the medicine den where Troutfur was sorting out some herbs.

"Huh?" Troutfur mumbled, looking up. "Ah Willowpaw. What is it?"

"I need to tell you something. I had- I had a dream.. Well not a dream, I mean, it was real. Like a- a-, I don't know how to explain it," stammered Willowpaw, suddenly feeling very visible, much too confident and way too nervous. Who was she to think she could suddenly be happy? She was suddenly so bold, strutting around camp, showing off her brother. She ducked her head then remembered Splashclaw's order. "Don't look down". Willowpaw looked into Troutfur's eyes, holding his gaze with a slight falter. But it was change.

"Yes, a dream? From StarClan you mean?" inquired Troutfur, dropping what he was doing.

"Yeah. From Splashclaw," said Willowpaw. Troutfur's ears pricked. He thought for a moment.

"Sit," he said finally. "And tell me." Willowpaw recounted what Splashclaw had said about Rook.

"This changes things" said Troutfur. "It changes everything." Willowpaw watched stunned as Troutfur sprinted out of the den. As she followed him, she bumped into Mintspot. She recoiled immediately, not knowing what to do. Mintspot stared at her, slightly in a daze.

"I know *Rook* is my son," Mintspot said.

"Yeah..," Willowpaw echoed, not knowing what to do.

"I know he is. I will show them. You know too, don't you? Our family will be complete. We're going to be happy," Mintspot said, her eyes glazing over. "We're going to be a real family. Forever. We'll be together forever."

"Rook won't be staying here forever," Willowpaw finally answered.

"Who are you to say that?" snapped Mintspot, her eyes blazing with anger. Willowpaw had never seen her like this. She would have been scared. Much too scared to ever talk to her mother like this. Let alone have eye contact with her. But this time,

Willowpaw stood her ground. For some reason she thought about Acornpaw. And Rook. How Rook gave her this confidence and how Acornpaw was her through all her bad times.

"He- He has another family," Willowpaw said. "I'm just warning you. So you'll be prepared. So you won't be surprised." Willowpaw swivelled around and padded back to the apprentice den with Mintspot fuming behind her. Acornpaw lifted his head as Willowpaw entered. She flashed him a small and made her way towards Rook but then stopped. She padded to Acornpaw and settled beside him.

"Thank you," she said, almost a whisper. Acornpaw beamed a bit. Happy she had not forgotten him. "For being there for me. My whole life."

"Always," Acornpaw promised.